FOREVER

KNIGHT

Spyder's Web

By

Jamie Melody Randell

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Translated: don't bother suing me, I ain't got nuthin';
and I sure ain't gonna go suing my favorite TV show, not for any reason.
S'cool?

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For Eric,
who should have been immortal

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In the dark, filthy alley behind the convenience store, Spyder struggled to get high.

She was having a hell of a time. Her veins were so scarred, she couldn't get the needle in; she cursed under her breath, hearing her voice echo against the brick walls. Neither the foul stench of rotting garbage nor the scuttling of rats in the shadows fazed her, she was immune to those distractions—but her difficulty with the needle was more than she could handle. She needed the shot, dammit, she was already getting the shakes, and if she screwed it up, she didn't have the money for another...

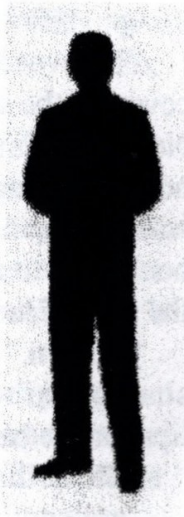
Finally, for lack of a better option, she positioned the hypodermic against the big vein in her neck, and drove the plunger home.

When she came back to (blurred) consciousness some time later, she was lying in a puddle of murky water; her ragged jeans were soaked along the left side, from hip to ankle. She'd blanked out when the shot hit, and in falling to the ground, had banged her head against the concrete—the left side of her face felt swollen.

But the drug was working in her, and she felt about as good as it was possible for her to feel: the gnawing ache of cold-turkey had faded with the satiation of her addiction.

She stumbled unsteadily to her feet—and that was when she noticed the man in the alley.

He was dressed in black, an immaculate shadow against the dreary confines of the narrow, grimy space. He was very tall, and his skin was nearly as pale as the full moon overhead; his face looked as if it could be ruthlessly cruel or tenderly seductive, depending on his mood, and his eyes were bright and hard and cold as diamonds.



As she gazed at him, Spyder felt a sharp shiver race along her spine, electric-hot: but whether it was apprehension or excitement, she could not tell.

She met his eyes fearlessly, with the resigned equanimity of one who'd long ago come to terms with her own mortality. Whether this man was a thief or a murderer or a rapist or a cop, there was nothing he could do to Spyder that would rival the pain of her brief life.

As such, she could afford to be blasé. "Hey, man," she said amiably, "what's up?"

His head tilted to one side, and he studied her; his nose twitched ever so slightly. "You have hepatitis," he observed, "and the beginnings of jaundice."

Spyder shrugged, unimpressed by his omniscience. The trackmarks that lived alongside the jailhouse tattoos on her arm were eloquent testimony to her nature; anyone in the know might guess that a junkie would have those illnesses.

"You're also HIV-positive," he informed her, in that smooth, cultured voice. "In case you didn't know."

She scowled up at him. Yeah, she knew; the last doctor who'd treated her, after one of her o.d.'s, had given her the test results. The social workers had made noises about counseling, treatment—but Spyder had left the hospital, against medical advice, and gone back to the life she knew best. The streets, the crash pads... and turning tricks for cash. So what if she had HIV? Half the hustlers did, 'specially the boys—and how else was she supposed to make a living?

"How old are you?" the pale stranger inquired.

He almost seemed to glow in the inky darkness, like an angel from heaven—but in his eyes, she could discern traces of hellfire. Either way, she sensed intuitively that he held great power, of a type unknown to normal men: there was no lying to him, not with those eyes trained so unwaveringly upon her, boring twin holes into her soul.

So she sighed, and faced the truth she'd been denying for years: the truth that her punkish makeup and streetwise attitude masked so effectively, that no cop or social worker or doctor had ever been able to discern. "Fifteen," Spyder murmured. "I'm fifteen."

He surprised her by greeting her announcement with matter-of-fact acceptance. "Fifteen," he mused. "A suitable age—ah, but then, in these modern times, you're not yet considered a woman, are you? No, you're supposed to be attending proms and parties, and hanging out at the mall..." His mild sardonicism made her smile, for she felt the same way about such things. "How is it that you are not?"

"I never had the luxury," Spyder said dismissively, casual scorn covering the streak of genuine pain that always seized her at the realization. No, no high school for her, no cheerleading or homework, none of the normal teenage things that others took for granted. Life had struck at her, had shattered her, had preyed upon her youthful vulnerability, and brought her here—to a dark alley, hypodermic needle still stuck and dangling from the skin of her neck, half-groggy as the heroin raced through her.

"Fifteen," he repeated, echoing her thoughts. "A decade and a half, and already you're half dead." A brief, joyless smile twisted itself across his lips for the barest instant. "Reminds me of the good old days."

"More than half," Spyder disputed calmly. "I'll be dead before I'm

twenty-one. Prob'ly before I'm eighteen."

"And that doesn't trouble you?" the stranger wondered curiously.

She shrugged again. "What do I have to live for?" she said, in a low voice.

Her mother was a cipher, a meaningless name on a birth certificate; her father had died of the junk when Spyder was eight, not before molesting her so badly that she was permanently scarred inside from it. She'd been shuttled from one foster home to another until she was old enough to get into serious trouble, and sent to increasingly more formidable lock-ups... at thirteen, she'd made her escape from the most recent institution and smuggled herself across the border into Canada in some guy's car trunk, and ever since, she'd made her own way on the streets. From one trick to the next, one shot to the next, one miserable night after another—existence, not living. What did she have to look forward to, to aspire to? Nothing, nothing at all.

The unknown man accepted her statement without comment, which surprised her all over again. Every adult she'd ever spoken to had been full of platitudes—yet this one seemed aware of the futility of her so-called life, and disinclined to offer her false hope.

She liked that; liked him. Liked his bluntness, his honesty—liked the feral glint in his eyes. He was a powerful man, and a dangerous man: the aura of ferocity he emitted made Spyder's old pimps seem like a bunch of pussycats. Yet she wasn't afraid, not at all.

"You're bleeding," he said, in a low, peculiarly intense voice.

Her hand rose to her neck, plucked away the needle, felt the hot moisture there. "Yeah, so?" she said, with faint, automatic belligerence.

He took a step closer, then another—Spyder backed up, but she had nowhere to go, and in a flash he was beside her: strong hands gripping her, eyes flashing red-gold with sudden fury...

A pain, sharp and somehow unbearably sweet: then blood-red rapture, delirious pleasure, thrumming in time with her rapid heartbeat. They were one, in a way that had nothing to do with the mechanical urgency of sex: they were joined by Spyder's blood, in body and mind.

She could see inside his soul, it seemed, could discern traces of the creature that lurked behind steel-crystal walls. Hard and cold and solid, his barriers, yet behind that ice lay warmth, of a sort—heated passions, suppressed rage, a boiling whirlpool of lava seething within a glacier volcano. And hidden beneath an avalanche of sullen disillusionment, a tightly-leashed tenderness, ruthlessly denied...

All this she felt through a haze of ecstasy: an overwhelming experience, larger and more intense than anything she'd ever known. And all the while, he was drinking her blood, her tainted blood, sucking the life and the death right out of her, and making it feel more like bliss than damnation...

When consciousness returned, she found herself cradled in impossibly strong arms, watching the last remnants of white-hot hunger fading from his eyes. His pallor had altered subtly, infused with a faint rosy glow—color he'd taken from her, along with her blood.

But what he'd given her: oh, yeah, it was definitely worth it.

She struggled to speak, rallying her last meager reserve of ebbing strength. "Thank you," she whispered.

His smile was halfway between a panther's snarl and honest delight; he leaned forward, brushed his lips against hers, and she tasted her own blood on his tongue. "Spyder," he murmured. "*Ma petite araignette.*"

And a veil of darkness descended before she could ask him what his words meant, or demand his name in return.

She awoke to the dull decor and antiseptic smell of a hospital ward, to the callous ministrations of a taciturn nurse. Hepatitis, yes, and jaundice, and the wretched nausea of drug withdrawal...

Spyder endured the sickness and pain, doggedly determined to survive, no matter the cost; for now she knew she had something to live for.

One sleepless night, in the wee hours of the morning, she dragged herself to the lounge for a smoke, pulling her IV stand behind her as she stumbled barefoot down the hall to the tiny room... and he was there, waiting for her. Clad in the white garb of a doctor, though she knew instinctively that it was only a ruse. He was no healer...

"Spyder," he greeted her courteously, rising from the green plastic chair and favoring her with a slight bow.

She was taken aback, for even that small gesture was beyond her experience. "Who are you?" she said insistently, anxiously. "What'd'you do to me?"

Those laser-beam eyes narrowed. "You know perfectly well what I did."

"Well, yeah," she admitted, inherent caution keeping her voice low, "I know what you did—but is it supposed to feel that good?"

The slightest trace of a smug grin. "Well, of course," he said, "when it's done properly."

"It was," she told him, "thank you," and watched his smile widen; *sure, compliment any man on his performance,* Spyder thought, and could barely repress her laughter.

"Can we do it again?" she inquired, with an eagerness she didn't bother to conceal.

His lips twisted. "I'm even less fond of the taste of antibiotics," he mentioned, "than I am of heroin. If you truly wish to repeat the experience,

you'll have to wait until the drugs have faded from your bloodstream—and you'll abstain from your own habits, completely."

She kicked morosely at the IV stand. "I'm a junkie, she muttered savagely. "If I could just kick the stuff an' stay off, don't'cha think I'd've done it already?"

He regarded her appraisingly. "Well, now you have an incentive."

Spyder groaned. "I'm a junkie," she repeated wearily. "You don't understand what that means."

"Don't I?" the stranger mused.

"I can't just stop," she insisted, nearly crying—the tears were welling up hot and heavy in her eyes, beyond her control, for she knew she couldn't do what he wanted. "I've tried, so many times, an' I can't help myself..." And as the tears finally overcame her, she turned away; she didn't want him to witness her weakness. With his strength, how could he view her with anything but contempt? "I can't do it," she sobbed. "I wish I could, but I can't."

She felt a weight on her shoulder: his hand, gripping her firmly, but not hard enough to hurt. "Not even if you had a better 'high'?" he inquired.

Before she could even wonder what that meant, he was drawing her close with hands that felt vaguely cool against her skin; she felt a thrill of desire coursing through her at the thought of what was to come. His eyes flashed golden-bright, and she waited breathlessly for his incision—but instead, he bit into his own lower lip, then kissed her, so that a slow trickle of blood flowed across her tongue.

If there had been more time for thought, she might have recoiled, for the idea of drinking blood was more than a little unappealing—but there was no time, and no other options; and from the first taste, she was lost.

If it had been rapture the other way around, well, this was even more incredible. Electricity, nuclear fission,. white fire sizzling through her soul. She gasped, clung to him desperately, craving more... but too soon it was over, and he was pushing her away; she moaned in frustration. "Yes, I know, chérie," he soothed, in a velvet-soft voice that caressed her as silkenly as his hands. "Believe me, I know how you feel. And is that sufficient reason to fight your inclinations, little Spyder? Can you give up your drugs, in favor of a more... overwhelming addiction?"

So gentle, he was so very gentle, even though the strength in him was enough to crush her like an insect. "Give me what I want," he murmured, "and you'll be well taken care of; you'll want for nothing—if you obey me, without fail," and she knew that this was not a negotiable point.

"I'll do my best..."

"I've seen your best; it's not good enough. I expect more from you than that."

"I'm a junkie," she repeated again, just for emphasis. "Why the hell do

you expect anything from me?"

Lightning-swift, his fingers dug cruelly into her jaw. "You're capable of strength," he stated flatly, "even a modicum of self-restraint. You will not let me down," and it wasn't an expression of faith, but an explicit warning that she had damned well better not.

Frustrated, irritated, Spyder grabbed the wrist of the arm that held her face immobile. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Amused, he released her. "Lucien LaCroix," he answered.

She struggled with the unfamiliar French pronunciation, sieving it through her distinct New York accent, and watching him grimace at her failure. "Hi, Lou," she said finally, weakly.

The look that crossed his face at her abbreviation made her laugh: such affronted dignity, incredulous at her impertinence—yet enjoying it on some level as well. "'Lou' it shall be," he conceded. "At least, until you learn how to pronounce my name properly. You will learn, by the way."

"Why?" Spyder pressed. "Why are you here, I mean; why do you want me..."

"For your blood, of course; why else? Wanton killing is frowned upon, these days; there are so many restrictions and guidelines that it's hardly worthwhile. And I do prefer fresh cuisine—ideally, from the source." His eyes flickered to her neck as if contemplating a quick snack, despite his professed distaste for the flavor of drugs in the bloodstream.

"Why me?" she persisted, bulldog-stubborn. "If you don't like the taste of smack, why not find yourself someone who isn't hooked on the stuff? Why even bother with me?"

"You intrigue me," he said dismissively, casually. "So little holds my interest, these days. Besides—you're a forgotten person, a throwaway. No one will search for you, should you... disappear, someday."

Spyder thought about that for a moment. "Seems like an interesting way to die," she commented. "All right, count me in. What do I do first, boss?"

A small smile indicated his approval of her ready concession. "Heal," he told her. "Stay clean. I shall monitor your progress; if I'm satisfied, I'll make arrangements to fetch you when you're ready to be discharged." His hand glided across her hair: the raven-black strands were softer than usual, since she'd had neither the resources nor the desire to coax it with gel and spray into the spiky mass so descriptive of her name. "You will never again need to sell your services to strangers; you'll never have to find your dinner in a dumpster, or sleep in a doorway in the rain. But I demand complete obedience in return." The hand tightened against her skull briefly, giving her a glimpse of the steel behind the deceptive velvet softness. "Do you understand me?"

"I understand," Spyder nodded, knowing that she was in the midst of

making a pact with the devil or something very like it, and not caring.

"And are we agreed?" he insisted.

"Agreed," she said promptly, without hesitation. Certainly, there was danger in his proposal, she knew that instinctively, but what other choice did she have? Going back to the streets? What sort of choice was that? No, his offer was the only option worth taking.

Besides, it had felt so good...

Lying in bed later, she contemplated her new future. To be the plaything of a vampire—for surely, that was what he had to be—for anyone else, it might seem to be damnation; for her, it was salvation. How many times had she sold pints of her blood? Now, that commodity had become infinitely more precious than the eight dollars per pint it had once commanded.

In the past, men had wanted her purely for the sexual gratification her body could give them: being wanted for her blood was a nice change. And Luc... Lac... Lou might be a vampire, but he wasn't half as evil as the pimps that had owned her. Not a quarter as frightening as her father had been, drunken and wasted and standing over her childhood bed, preparing to abuse her once again...

Compared to what she'd endured in the past, Lou was just a big ol' teddy bear—and at least, when he used her, he gave her something back. Pleasure, so exquisite she could hardly believe it. The abuse she'd sustained as a kid and her subsequent career as a prostitute had robbed her of the ability to experience sexual fulfillment... Lou had given her something just as good, if not better; something she'd never dreamed she'd know.

For the first time in memory, Spyder fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Over the weeks of her recuperation, there were gifts—stylish clothes in her size, books that her third-grade education barely permitted her to read, fresh flowers daily. Spyder adhered to the doctor's prescribed regimen like a good little patient, eagerly awaiting her release; although Lou had not returned to visit, she could sometimes feel his presence, his dark regard watching her from an invisible distance.

It comforted her to know that he was there, somewhere; that she was not alone.

On the day of her discharge, a sleek black limousine picked her up at the doorstep of the charity hospital, and transported her to a shiny, modern condominium on the shore of Lake Ontario. The apartment held every luxury one might wish for, including a lushly-appointed bedroom with a

king-sized bed. Spyder explored eagerly, finally succumbing to the lure of the marble bath, filling it with steaming water and swirling suds and forty-three kilos of teenage girl.

She found hair gels in the bathroom cabinet, and wrapped in a thick towel, coaxed her hair into arachnid spikes; made careful selections from the array of cosmetics and the well-stocked closets, and decked herself out like the punkette princess she'd once been. Everything she might need was at her fingertips: the clothes were all in her size, and styles she loved. Either Lou had gone to some lengths to ensure her comfort, or it was a hell of a nice coincidence.

Spyder found a variety of prepackaged foods in the fridge, living alongside wine bottles containing a liquid too thick to be wine... she microwaved a carton of Swedish meatballs and ate it on the balcony, watching the sun set off to her right. The nourishment soothed her hunger, and the dying crimson stain in the western sky filled her with anticipation, a delightful tingle that raced along her spine.

When no hint of sunlight remained, when the sky was uniformly black and speckled with stars, he arrived.

He was dressed in black again, was every bit as magnificent as the dark angel who'd given her such rapture in that squalid alley that seemed an eternity away—in return for the tainted blood that was no sacrifice for her to surrender...

"I see you've made yourself at home," he observed. "As well you should; you will live here, from this point forward."

She gaped. "Me, live here?" It seemed impossible, ludicrous. This plush urban palace?

"Would you prefer that we conduct our liaisons in a hovel? I dislike squalor, and have no intention of spending any length of time in such primitive surroundings. This is your home, little Spyder, and you may redecorate it as you please—but you may not make any changes that might affect the unit's market value; and I expect you it kept clean." He made himself comfortable on the leather couch, gestured for her to join him, and she sat down beside him. "Shall we review the terms of your employment?"

"Is that what you call it?" she countered wryly. "Not slavery?"

"You are receiving compensation for services rendered." He quirked an eyebrow at her, almost playfully; the humorous expression was unexpectedly appealing on his severe face. "Sounds like a job to me," he continued. "Unless you'd rather go back to hustling?"

She made a face. "No, thanks," she muttered.

"Oh, good, you have some common sense," in that soft purr that made her feel all tingly. "As with any job, your employment is contingent on

several conditions."

"Like for instance?" she probed.

He propped booted feet up on the glass coffee table. "My nature, and the nature of our relationship, are to remain confidential," he said conversationally. "I'll supply you with a new identity, a suitable cover story... we'll discuss details later; the important thing for you to remember is that if you dare reveal my secrets to anyone, you will die, immediately. As will the one to whom you've spoken."

"Makes sense to me," Spyder agreed readily. "No problem. Next?"

"You will refrain from all drug use," he said predictably.

"That one's hard," she muttered. "All drug use?"

"All," he confirmed.

"And if I... slip?"

The look on his face told her that she really didn't want to know the consequences.

"Okay, fine," Spyder said hastily. "What else?"

He stretched lazily. "Fetch me one of the bottles from the refrigerator," he directed.

She hurried to obey, rummaged for a corkscrew; his impatient gesture caused her to abandon the effort, and she watched as he pried the cork from the flask with his teeth. "Is that...?" she inquired hesitantly, as he drank.

"Inferior stock," he supplied, "but acceptable." He took another long swig, then set the bottle aside. "You will resume your schooling," he told her. "I expect you to be of use to me in more ways than the one, and you'll require a proper education for that."

"School?" Spyder moaned in dismay. "Oh, man, you gotta be kidding... no, you're not," she discovered, with a glance at his face. "But I'm lousy at it...!"

"I'll ensure that you receive proper tutoring. You will learn."

She sighed. "Yes, sir, she grumbled, sarcasm obliterating any pretense of respectful manners.

Oddly enough, he seemed pleased. "You'll do," he decided.

"What else do you want from me?" she demanded. The list was growing longer and longer, and every new requirement decreased the probability that she'd be able to live up to his expectations.

He considered. "That will do, for now," he decided. His gaze flickered to the half-empty wine bottle before settling on her neck, and she knew what impelled his magnanimous acceptance: he was hungry, as desirous of her blood as her erstwhile customers had been of her body—no, even more so.

Spyder caught his gaze, stared into his eyes as they shifted from blue to crimson to gold, and fancied that she could feel some of what he felt when he looked at her. More than hunger, or lust, or desire: a literal craving that

enfolded him, consumed him thoroughly.

Addiction, literal and complete.

He had control enough to wait for his fix; his hands were ludicrously tender as they caressed her. "You don't fear me," he said casually, as if discussing the weather.

"You've seen what my life's been like," she parried, "why would I be afraid of you?"

"You have no intention of resisting me, do you?"

"You kidding?" She was surprised. "Why would I do that? You're so damn good..."

He smiled at that, and ever so carefully eased down the spaghetti strap of her blouse, pressed his lips to her shoulder. Withdrew. "Next time," he mentioned, "don't spray perfume on your neck, hmmm?"

Spyder laughed. "Sorry," she murmured, and wrapped her arms around him, pulled him close as if he were an ordinary man.

His fangs sank into her neck, and once more she was submerged in ecstasy: in fierce passion, feral desire, exquisite satiation. And when he'd taken enough blood to temporarily appease his hunger, he took her in another, more human manner, proving to Spyder that her ability to experience sexual pleasure was not nearly so limited as she'd thought... She had grown up equating sex with commerce, with pain; that night was the beginning of a wholly different sort of education than the scholastic one her benefactor had proposed. He was careful, and so very skillful—he brought her to the peak of ecstasy again and again, and when she was certain she had experienced the absolute apex of delirium, he sank his fangs into her neck once more, and made her bliss complete.

Afterwards, she roused herself from a delightful languor, stretched her legs experimentally—was she still capable of walking, after all that? Not too likely—and glanced over at the figure across the room, wrapped in a plush robe, engrossed in something on the computer screen.

She could barely move, so sated from their joining, but he seemed unaffected; except for a faint flushed tone to his skin and a slight smug grin, it was nearly impossible to discern any lingering trace of their liaison in his imperturbable facade.

And it seemed perfectly right to her, somehow, that this should be so.

"You're incredible," she said fondly.

Absorbed in his work, he spared her a brief sideways glance. "And you are quite tasty," he said, returning the compliment in his own unique manner, and flashed her a grin.

Spyder laughed. "Is it going to be this good all the time," she wondered, "or are you just breaking me in gently?"

All at once, she had his full attention. "That depends," he said, "on you."

Oh, yeah: she was expected to be obedient. "I'll do my best," she promised.

"Better than your best, remember," he admonished her. Tapped a few keys at the terminal and sat back, looking mildly pleased. "There you go, my dear," he said, "your new identity."

She struggled to her feet, wincing at the aches in her thighs, wrapped herself in a robe that matched his and came to stare over his shoulder. "You did this?" she asked, awed.

"An associate of mine, who specializes in such things." He waved his hand at the screen impatiently. "Does it suit you?"

Spyder scanned the information as quickly as she could. He'd kept her first name, changed her last: added several years to her age, releasing her from the legal trap of 'jailbait'. A new origin, a new history, a fictional alteration of her pitiful, pathetic past. A chance to escape, to be someone else...

"I like it," she said softly. "Thank you."

He swiveled around in the expensive office chair, pulled her down onto his lap, and she succumbed willingly. In all the years she'd sold herself, she'd never once commanded so high a price as the one he seemed ready to pay. How delightful, to be an expensive purchase instead of a cheap one.

Spyder smiled as she felt his lips at her neck, convinced that nothing could ever be as perfect as this...

She cowered in the corner and whimpered, trying not to cry out; but as his hand struck her, the agony of it made her howl involuntarily.

He was really being very gentle, she knew. He could have crushed her, destroyed her, easily broken her bones. Instead, he was taking great care to bruise and wound, instead of inflicting more permanent damage. He was holding back, very definitely.

But it still hurt; it hurt like hell.

"Lou, I'm sorry," she sobbed, "I won't do it again, I promise! I swear I won't, oh please, don't hurt me anymore..."

Standing over her, glowering down at her; she cringed away from him fearfully. "I didn't mean to!" she whined. "I couldn't help myself!"

"Think very carefully before you adopt that as your defense." His voice was calm, but oh, the menace in it. "If you truly cannot control your urges and whims, I have no further use for you." And that would mean her death; he'd warned her of that long ago. "If, on the other hand, this was merely a minor lapse, I may see fit to grant you a reprieve..."

"I'll never shoot up again," she implored him, "never, Lou, I promise!"

"All right, then. Get up," he ordered, and she scrambled to obey, never

mind her pain.

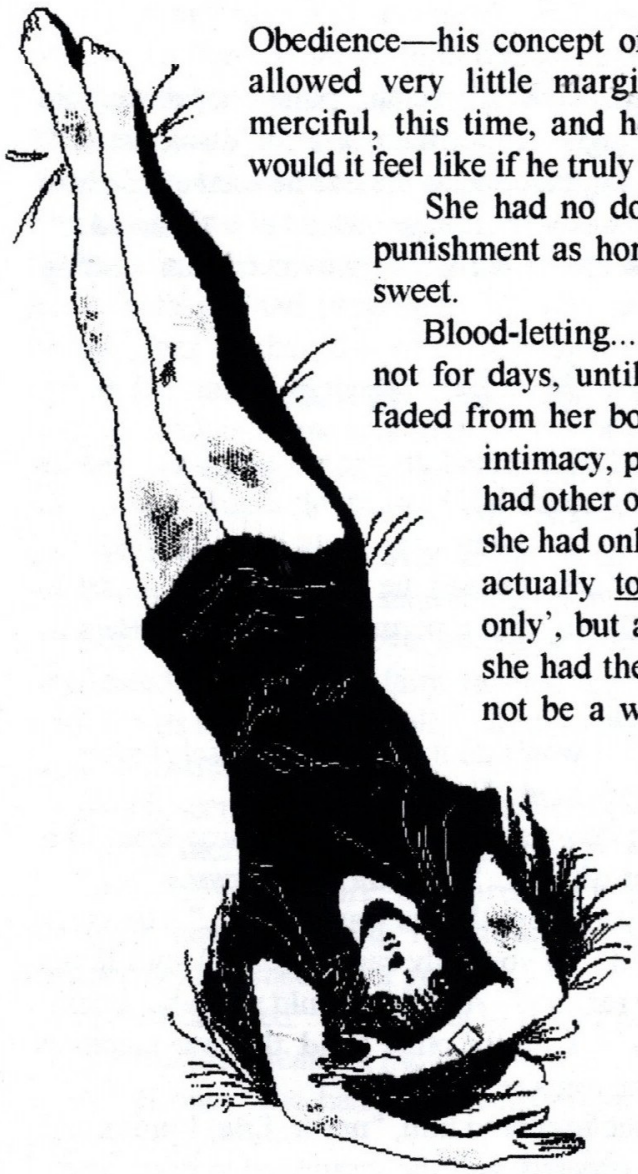
He inspected the damage he'd done, and she tried not to flinch at his touch. "Get the first aid kit," he told her, and she did; then she held very still as he bandaged her lacerations. "Wasted blood," he muttered in disgust, wiping the heroin-tainted fluid from his fingers fastidiously. "You will not make this mistake again."

"I won't, I promise," she said fervently, grateful for the anesthetic balm of the first aid cream, and the gentleness of his hands as he applied it. The very same hands that had caused her pain, now soothing it...

But she couldn't find it in herself to be angry with him. After all, he had warned her, and she had disobeyed... what more could she expect?

She was just grateful he'd let her live. And let her off so lightly—in the past, pimps had injured her far worse.

Much later, though, as she struggled to find a sleeping position that didn't hurt, she began to wonder just what she'd let herself in for.



Obedience—his concept of the word was ruthless, and allowed very little margin for error. He had been merciful, this time, and her bruises were severe; what would it feel like if he truly wished to harm her?

She had no doubt that he would make her punishment as horrible as the blood-letting was sweet.

Blood-letting... there would be none of that, not for days, until the results of her lapse had faded from her body. Spyder would miss that intimacy, probably more than he did. He had other outlets to sate his desires, while she had only him—granted, he had never actually told her to 'cleave unto him only', but all men were possessive—and she had the distinct feeling that it would not be a wise idea to fool around with anyone else, or at least, to let him catch her doing it.

Not that sex was what she wanted; except for the times with him, she'd never gained any pleasure from it. No, she wanted his lips at her neck, his fangs plunging home—it was a penetration more exquisite than any other.

And now she would be denied that for an indeterminate time, all because she had indulged in a forbidden shot of a drug she hadn't really even wanted; habit had drawn her to her old haunts, her old dealers, her old vices. A habit she needed to break, before it caused her to ruin the best thing that had ever happened to her.

It seemed that he was having the same thought, for he came into her room, seated himself on the edge of the bed, and said, "You have entirely too much free time on your hands.

Spyder blinked up at him. "Thought you left," she murmured blurrily; it wasn't like him to hang around after he'd gotten what he wanted—or after he'd administered suitable punishment, for not having gotten it.

He didn't even deign to notice her comment. "I see, now, that leaving you to your own devices is a dangerous thing. How can we remedy this situation, I wonder?" She could almost hear the disk drive whirring away in his head. "I own a small radio station, as you know."

"CERK, yeah, I know." She'd happened across 'the Nightcrawler's' show by accident, and had subsequently taken great pains to never miss it; his nightly monologues provided a reliable method of keeping track of his mercurial moods, as well as offering interesting insights into his mysterious past and enigmatic personality—if you knew how to listen properly.

"You seem to require a diversion. How would you like to assist me with the station's operation?" And she knew it wasn't an offer, but a command. She didn't protest—he could have ordered her into menial labor, and she would have had no recourse; he was being unexpectedly generous. Work at a radio station? Sure, why not?

She repeated the last three words to him, and he nodded, satisfied. "Fine. You'll start tomorrow night. In the meantime, I expect you to stay away from your old associates..."

"I'm not going anywhere," Spyder said faintly, rubbing a painful spot on her arm, "least, not tomorrow."

His eyes flickered toward the developing bruise. "You deserved that," he said dispassionately.

"Yeah, I did," she sighed, and caught his surprise at her agreement. "I screwed up, Boss," for he preferred that to her Americanized abbreviation of his name, "and I'm really sorry. It was stupid, I know."

He regarded her narrowly. "If you're truly so sorry, why did you do it in the first place?"

"Hell, I dunno. Maybe 'cause that's what I always do, y'know? I mean, ever since I was eleven, man... and always, it was straight back to the junk, no matter how long I'd been clean."

"Stupid, indeed," he said disparagingly.

"You're telling me? I know," she conceded. "But now... now I've got a reason to stay clean. To <u>want</u> to stay clean. You..." and she hesitated, for

she'd never voiced her feelings before. "You gave me a reason to live."

"So that I might drink your blood," he said neutrally, "and someday, kill you myself."

Spyder nodded vigorously, eagerly. "Yeah," she said, "that's exactly it."

"What a choice irony, that you view my actions as altruism..."

"Al-troo-what?"

"Charity," he elaborated.

"Nah," said Spyder. "You're not doing me any favors, at least not on purpose. But isn't it cool that you get what you want, an' I like it too? I mean... what could be better than that?"

"Symbiosis, rather than parasitism," he mused, and laughed mirthlessly. "Even more ironic. Someday, I shall introduce you to Nicholas; I'll enjoy watching you explain your viewpoint to him."

"Who's Nicholas?" she wondered curiously.

"My child. My nemesis. My recurrent migraine headache. Suffice it to say that he is an old acquaintance... some seven hundred years old, in fact."

"He's a vampire, then?"

"Yes—to the degree that he allows himself to be, that is."

Spyder didn't understand, but decided not to probe; his temper had a way of flaring up at the oddest, most unpredictable times. Some subjects were sore spots with him; from the sound of it, this Nicholas was one of them.

"What am I gonna do at the station?" she asked instead.

"Whatever I tell you to do," he said mildly.

She had a sudden vision of herself scrubbing out toilets and spit-shining the floors. "Can I be a deejay, like you?"

"I am not a 'deejay'; I am a media personality." His voice was all injured dignity, leavened by that razor-edged humor of his; he wasn't above laughing at himself, as long as he approved of the joke in question. "And as for you... if you behave yourself, perhaps I'll train you..."

"To be a 'media personality'?"

"You would be lucky to achieve the level of 'deejay'. Once you've earned your equivalency diploma."

"I knew there was a catch," Spyder lamented.

He gave her one of his wry grins and moved to depart—she knew he wouldn't stay, not when he couldn't/wouldn't indulge in a hearty meal—and the last thing she wanted was for him to leave. "Hey, Lou," she called after him, "do I get a kiss goodnight?" Not knowing why she was saying it, for she wasn't the sentimental sort, and neither was he—but after her punishment, she needed to feel some small expression of caring, even if it wasn't truly meant.

In her past life, her pimps had always used that very normal psychological trigger as a means of controlling her, of swaying her emotions from rightful rage to grudging forgiveness, for some form of abuse she hadn't deserved. But he hadn't made any attempt to cajole her into a better mood; he didn't seem to care if she hated him for what he'd done.

Oddly enough, she liked that about him.

The look of annoyance on his face made her wish she hadn't made such a ridiculous request; but he leaned over and pressed his lips briefly against hers—and gave her a great gift: a few minuscule drops of his own blood, from a tiny self-inflicted incision on his lip. Just enough to send a sharp, sweet thrill of desire through her; to drown all lingering uncertainties; to mute the pain of the beating so that she might sleep.

It might not be al... altru... charity, she thought hazily, as she sank back against the pillows, *but there sure is kindness involved, no matter what he says.*

"G'night, Lou," she murmured sleepily, and felt his hand rest on top of her head for the briefest moment before his departure.

"Floors swept?"

"Uh-huh."

"Tapes catalogued?"

"Two hours ago."

"Homework?"

"Right here, Boss."

He scrutinized the papers she handed him. "Your handwriting's improving," he observed.

"I'm trying," she said modestly.

"The answers to questions fourteen, sixteen and seventeen are wrong," he evaluated, and handed the pages back to her. "Redo them tomorrow."

"It's not due 'til Monday," she argued.

"Tomorrow," he said firmly, and she sighed and nodded.

"I pulled the music you wanted for tonight," Spyder said. "Had to go to HMV for a couple of the new CDs. And I got the phone company in here this afternoon, to clear up that problem you've been having with the incoming lines." She was particularly proud of that last; the phone company had been stalling him for weeks.

"Very good," he said approvingly, and she felt his hand come to rest on the top of her head; the only affectionate gesture he allowed himself. "Are we ready, then?"

Spyder nodded enthusiastically and scampered to the sound board,

made herself at home. She checked the settings with skilled ease: he had required her to memorize the entire layout of the console, the function of every switch and knob and fader, before he'd even allowed her to set foot in the studio for an off-air practice session. She'd been working as his technician for several weeks now, and had not made one significant mistake so far. And he was proud of her; she could tell, though he was unfailingly sparing with his praise.

She was even beginning to get the hang of the pronunciation of "LaCroix", though it twisted her tongue every time she attempted it.

Music filled her ears as she donned her headphones, rechecked settings with meticulous care; as the song drew to a close, she flipped the switches that would send his voice over the air, and signaled to him that he was on.

"Good evening, Toronto," he said, in the silky voice that invariably sent chills up her spine. "This is the Nightcrawler. Tonight's topic is despair... tell me your troubles, my children; let me soothe your pain." His tone was so very gentle, but his expression revealed an irony that the Nightcrawler's many fans would never see.

As usual, the phone lines began to light up at once, twinkling brightly in the shadowy studio. He liked to choose his calls himself, so there was very little for Spyder to do except monitor the levels, keep her finger on the 'panic' button that would bleep out offensive language, and listen to the Boss at work.

Sometimes, the callers' stories evoked faint twinges of sympathy; more often, Spyder fought to repress her laughter. She'd often been told that she had a nasty sense of humor, to which she'd wholeheartedly agreed; in the past, it had gotten her into trouble, but now it was an asset, since he shared her concept of comedy. Every so often, their eyes met through the soundproofed glass, and she could see the bright glee in his as they shared some silent, private joke.

And then came the call that tore Spyder apart.

The voice was timid and trembling. "M-my name's Sheryl," and the sound of it jerked her upright from her relaxed slouch. She saw his attention flicker to her, sensing her sudden agitation, though he said nary a word. "I-I know all about despair. In fact, I'm pretty desperate right now," and Sheryl attempted a shaky laugh.

"Is that so. Tell me about it," he invited, deliberately not looking at Spyder.

"Well, I... I've done some pretty stupid things," Sheryl faltered.

"Like what?" So smooth, he was; no wonder his fans loved him so. The velvet voice of the Nightcrawler gave no hint of the venom lurking beneath.

"I... I did drugs, an' I... did other stuff... I was a hooker." The words came as if Sheryl had had to force them out. "But I stopped, I quit doing everything. I went into a program, an' I came out clean, an' stayed that

way for the last two months!" Such defiance in her tone, and oh, such pain.

"Congratulations." Now he did look at Spyder, one eyebrow lifting; through the tentative mental link that bound her to him, she sensed his curiosity.

I know her, she thought at him, shaping her musings clearly so he would hear. *We were sorta... friends.* And colleagues in the sex trade, partners in crime. But Sheryl had always been so vivacious and bubbly and bright, so damnably optimistic; what had happened to make her sound so bleak?

"What troubles you, Sheryl?" LaCroix asked, his eyes never leaving Spyder's.

A muffled sob came through the phone lines. "I've got AIDS," Sheryl blurted out. "I didn't even know I had HIV, and now I just found out that I've got AIDS... I quit shooting up, but it was too late..." and she began to cry in earnest.

Spyder had never heard Sheryl cry, and the sound of it broke her heart.

Help her, she implored silently. *Oh, please, help her...*

He did not acknowledge her plea. "How old are you, Sheryl?"

"Th-th-thirteen," came the shuddering response.

"Thirteen," LaCroix repeated thoughtfully, and Spyder heard his voice in her head, cool and quiet. *A bit young for my liking...*

She's got blood, Spyder insisted urgently, *an' it's HIV-infected blood; you said you liked the taste... She's my friend, Boss! If it hadn't been for Sheryl, I'd've never survived this long...*

Abruptly, he terminated the contact; and she waited breathlessly to see what he would do.

At last, he spoke. "We must all deal with the consequences of our actions," said the Nightcrawler. "Your infection is the price you've paid for your misdeeds. However," with a meaningful glance at Spyder, "sometimes even the most hopeless souls find salvation, in the oddest places."

Tears sprang to Spyder's eyes as she realized what he meant to do; tears of happiness, and relief.

"Take heart, my child," he said softly. "Nothing is as bad as it seems," and signaled to Spyder to cut to a commercial.

After a few private words with the caller, he flicked the intercom switch. "Play one of the archive tapes," he said. "I'm going to get her."

She sighed, and felt as if she might dissolve completely into tears. "Thank you," she murmured.

Through the glass, he shot her an inscrutable look. "Don't thank me just yet," he responded dryly, and disappeared with inhuman swiftness.

He never returned to the station, and at sunrise, Spyder sought him out; she found him in her apartment, stretched out on the sofa lazily, his skin bearing the rosy flush that indicated he'd fed well. "She's in there," he

said, waving one languid hand toward the bedroom door. "She's mine, now, as you are."

Spyder sagged against the wall, tension draining from her in a rush. "Thank you," she breathed.

He favored her with the ghost of a smile. "Come here," he said.

She went to him, slid onto the broad couch and into his arms, nuzzling him warmly. "Why do you care?" he inquired. "Why does she matter to you?"

Spyder closed her eyes and gave him his answer in a series of mental images, recollections. How they'd been hookers together, working for the same pimp. How Freddy had introduced them both to heroin, how they'd shot up together that first time. How Sheryl had talked her out of suicide, time and time again; how the spunky little girl had kept Spyder's spirits up, throughout their hellish existence. They'd lost track of each other recently, but Spyder had always thought of her fondly, hoped Sheryl had survived...

And now she would, for a far lesser price than she'd previously paid.

"We shall see," said LaCroix aloud, and the dubious tone to his voice made Spyder pull back to look at him; he drew her down again, stroking her hair, caressing her gently. His lips brushed against her neck, and she tilted her head sideways so he could easily reach his preferred spot.

As always, once he'd sunk his fangs into the vein, there was no room in Spyder's mind for anything but pleasure—certainly not the nagging worry that his evident doubt had produced in her.

"He's evil, Spyder," said Sheryl; her light blue eyes, so like LaCroix's, clouded over with uncharacteristic somberness. "Can't you see that?"

Spyder shrugged. "He's good to us," she said. "He saved our lives."

"He hasn't saved us! He's eating us alive!" Since LaCroix had brought her to the apartment, Sheryl had been gloomy and morose, so far a departure from her usual persona that Spyder hardly recognized her old friend. "We're his slaves! Spyder, how can you stand it?"

"He saved me," she reiterated forcefully, taking refuge in repetition; she didn't like where the conversation was going. "He's taking care of us, Sheryl."

"He's treating us just like Freddy did!" Freddy, their erstwhile pimp, who'd beaten them for no reason, and allowed them only the bare minimum of sustenance. "Spyder, don't you understand?" Sheryl pleaded. "We have to get away from him!"

Spyder stared at the younger girl, not quite knowing what to do. Sheryl was so earnest; obviously, she believed what she was saying. "How would you want us to do that?" she said cautiously.

"It'll be easy!" Now this was the old Sheryl, bubbly and eager. "Lookit this stuff, Spyder; we could hock one of these knickknack things, just one, and we'd have enough to get away from here. Start fresh, somewhere else..." Her eyes sought Spyder's. "C'mon, come with me," she wheedled.

Spyder's thoughts were whirling; it was all so far from what she'd expected. She'd figured that Sheryl would be as grateful as she was, as happy to be a part of their private little enclave... She'd fought back her own jealousy at the other girl's sharing of 'her' LaCroix, not wanting her own petty jealousy to spoil Sheryl's experience; the only thing that had made it bearable was the fact that he apparently considered the fresh-faced child too young for physical intimacy. Obviously, Spyder's streetwise pseudomaturity was more to his liking; all he had taken from Sheryl had been her blood.

The idea that Sheryl had found that experience horrifying rather than blissfully pleasurable was so alien to Spyder that she simply could not imagine it.

"And if I don't?" she asked.

"If you don't come," Sheryl said, with a steely determination Spyder had never seen before, "I'll go without you. I'm leaving, Spyder!" The ferocity in the pale blue eyes faded, replaced once more by the plaintive look. "C'mon, Spyder, you've gotta come with me..."

Faced with her friend's anxiety, she couldn't say no, but... how could she leave LaCroix? He was everything to Spyder, everything—he was a selfish bastard, true, but within the parameters of his own self-interest, he was so good to her...

Spyder sighed. "All right," she said slowly. "I'll come with you."

"Great!" Sheryl's enthusiasm was palpable; she clapped her hands together gleefully. "I'm gonna go pack," and she skipped off to the bedroom to collect her clothes—the clothes LaCroix had provided.

Spyder sat on the couch and thought hard. About sweet little Sheryl, destined to die young from the side effects of her foolish choices; the same stupid decisions Spyder had made. About big, bad LaCroix, who's rescued them both from their folly. The funny thing was, both of them wanted Spyder for selfish reasons; Sheryl required companionship the same way LaCroix needed blood.

But which one should she choose?

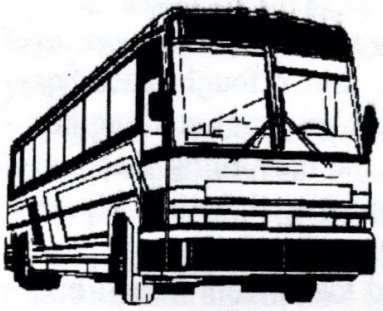
She could hear Sheryl singing to herself in the bedroom, and in some obscure way it reminded her of the way LaCroix hummed under his breath when he was deeply immersed in concentration. She'd grown accustomed to that subliminal music, from both of them. To never hear that music again... but which music would she deny herself?

Spyder took a deep breath, released it. Glanced out the window, at the bright sunny day that glared back at her. She'd lived a nocturnal existence

for so long that it was almost a surprise to witness the light of day...

It was conceivable that, if they made their escape quickly, LaCroix might never find them.

With another, longer sigh, Spyder made her choice.



The small carving had fetched two hundred and thirty dollars, just enough to buy two bus tickets to New York. Spyder had insisted on her old home town as their destination, even though there was a considerable wait until the next bus, and Sheryl had very reluctantly conceded; when twilight began to deepen into dusk, they were still waiting at the terminal for their bus to depart.

Sitting on the edge of the curb, sucking on a cigarette, thinking anxious thoughts, Spyder felt a strong hand clamp down on her shoulder; if she hadn't already guessed, Sheryl's small squeak of terror would have swiftly identified the newcomer.

She glanced sideways at Sheryl's frightened face, then upward at the glowering demon above. "Leaving so soon?" LaCroix demanded, in the coldest voice Spyder had ever heard.

Sheryl began to stammer out an excuse, but never got the chance to finish; LaCroix's hands dragged them both to their feet, wrenched them toward the street, then upward...

"Is this how you repay my generosity?" In the relative privacy of their rooftop perch, LaCroix's icy voice battered against them relentlessly. "By stealing from me, and running away?"

"Generosity? You're a murderer!" Sheryl shrieked, perilously close to hysteria. "Vampire!"

"Yes," LaCroix acknowledged. "So?"

His calm acceptance of her verdict seemed to unnerve Sheryl completely. She took a step backward, then another, then began to run—although where she thought she was going was a mystery; they were six stories up, with nary a fire escape in sight.

LaCroix began to move as well, a black-clad blur; Spyder watched, knowing what was about to happen, unable to look away.

He caught her effortlessly, held her easily, despite her struggles. Sheryl screamed and fought, to no avail, and without any of the smooth seduction Spyder had come to take for granted, LaCroix sank his fangs into Sheryl's neck.

Spyder watched, simply stood there and watched, as he drained the young girl dry.

Afterwards, it was all she could do to tear her eyes away from Sheryl's

lifeless form, from the head twisted at an unnatural angle where he'd snapped her neck. When she did, it was to see LaCroix advancing toward her, eyes red-gold with vampiric fury.

He caught her face in his hands, and Spyder stared up at him fearlessly. Slowly, the inhuman sheen faded, as she watched. "Thank you for phoning me," LaCroix said politely.

Spyder couldn't help glancing at Sheryl's corpse; the sight made her shudder.

"Tell me," he went on, conversationally, "why didn't you go with her? What made you betray her to me?"

How like him, Spyder mused, to phrase it in such a way, to increase her guilt and pain. Yet somehow, it didn't—instead, all she could feel was quiet pleasure at his presence, displacing her horror over Sheryl's death.

And he was still waiting for his explanation, and she knew how impatient he could be. "I didn't want to lie to you," she began, "and I didn't want to steal from you. But mostly... I didn't want to leave you." Her voice dropped to a near-whisper at the end; it wasn't something she felt comfortable admitting.

"Ahhhhh... Because you love me." His voice dripped sarcasm.

"Sorta, I guess," Spyder conceded, since there was no point lying to him; he could detect even the smallest falsehood.

"The way a dog loves its master," he said acidly.

His words were meant to be demeaning, yet Spyder's chin lifted with defiant pride. "Yeah, exactly," she shot back. "I sit up and roll over and fetch on your command, and when I do it right, you throw me a bone. And y'know what? I don't care. After what I've been through, Boss, being your pet is like a permanent vacation."

The slight softening of his severe features was encouraging; Spyder dared to venture closer. "I'm your property," she continued. "I belong to you. You own me... an' I'm freer than I've ever been in my life."

LaCroix laughed, almost against his will, it seemed. "Sensible girl," he commented, and drew her close; she wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned into him.

Some vestige of human compassion impelled her to ask, "Did I do the right thing?"

"Right?" A sardonic laugh. "By whose standards, my dear? Yours? Mine?"

"Oh, I dunno..." Spyder groaned softly. "Was Sheryl right?"

"Do you believe she was?"

"I hate it when you answer my questions with questions!" She shoved at him, knowing she couldn't hurt him, knowing he wouldn't take offense. "Tell me," she pleaded, "something, anything; tell me I was wrong, tell me I was right, tell me to go to hell, but tell me something!"

"Araignette, we're both going to hell," he said mildly, "if there is such a place, which I sincerely doubt. In any case—you were loyal to me, in keeping with our bargain."

"So you're saying I did the right thing," she probed.

"Well, of course I think so," he said pragmatically. "What else would you expect? Shall I condemn you for your allegiance to me?"

"It would be pretty damn typical of you, actually," she muttered.

Honest-to-goodness merry laughter, not the usual ironic chuckle; such mirth, coming from him, was startling enough to lighten her mood.

But only for a moment. "She was my friend," Spyder moaned. "And now she's dead..." She buried her face against his chest, seeking solace—though it was not in his nature to offer consolation.

Yet strangely enough, it was comforting simply to rest against his immense strength, and know that he was there—that in his own way, he valued her. He'd taken her off the street, given her a home and a life and a reason to continue living; how could she ever have betrayed him?

Even if it meant Sheryl's death...

"I do love you," she murmured, almost belligerently. "You're such a sonuvabitch, an' I love you so much..."

She felt his arm tighten around her shoulders, a slight possessive gesture. "Good," said LaCroix. "That does make everything so much easier."

"I'll bet it does," she retorted, laughing through her tears.

Jason was so much simpler to handle. The shaggy-haired teen idolized LaCroix; he'd been an ardent fan of 'the Nightcrawler' since his impressionable youth, and he loved the blood-letting as much as Spyder did.

He was also a passable bedmate, enthusiastic if not terribly skillful; and Spyder found his presence to be a delightful diversion through the long daylight hours.

LaCroix had selected Jason after coming across the boy in an alley, just as he'd found Spyder. She'd been pleasantly surprised that he'd actually deigned to consult her before bringing Jason into the 'family'. She'd agreed, of course; the young man was cuter than cute, and the fact of his gender indicated that Spyder would continue to be the only one in LaCroix's bed. At least, as far as she knew: his general contempt toward humans meant that she was probably the only mortal allowed that privilege, and if he was involved with any other vampires, she really didn't want to know.

Sometimes, Spyder wondered if LaCroix had 'adopted' Jason as a gift

to her, a silent apology for the tragedy of Sheryl's death. Not that she'd ever expected his contrition, or required it. He'd had to kill Sheryl, to keep his secret: Spyder knew that, accepted it. And at that, Sheryl's death had been swifter and more painless than either the AIDS virus or her heroin abuse would have given her. She knew that, too.

But despite her knowledge, it had hurt to lose her old friend, and he knew it: and LaCroix could be very solicitous and caring, in his own way. How like him, to entice another into willing slavery, simply to bring his 'pet' a measure of happiness.

Especially since it directly benefited him to do so.

If Jason had one significant fault, it was that he was lazy; Spyder had had to bully him into vacuuming, as with all his chores. Now he was doing it, grumbling non-stop but doing the job—he deferred to her authority without argument; LaCroix had made it very clear to him at the outset that Spyder's directives were to be obeyed, second only to his own.

Unlike Sheryl, Jason had the sense to realize that one did not cross LaCroix; not if one wanted to keep living.

"You wanna go out tonight?" he yelled, over the machine's roar.

"Can't," Spyder called back, from her seat on the couch. "I'm working."

Jason made a sour face that didn't suit his cherubic features. "You're always working," he complained. "I get so bored! How come I can't come down to the studio?"

"There's nothing for you to do there," Spyder told him kindly. Jason meant well, but he was technologically ignorant and all thumbs; every time he'd been permitted at the station, he'd managed to do something catastrophic. Once, CERK had been off the air for two hours during the overnight prime-time... Spyder was tutoring him during the day, but it was slow going. After that last debacle, LaCroix had decreed that Jason was not to come to the station during 'the Nightcrawler's' show until he could conduct himself properly, and Spyder was not about to contradict that order.

"You just stay put," she told him fondly, "right here, where you're safe."

Jason scowled. "I'm sick of being safe," he muttered dolefully. "I wanna go out, Spyder!"

"Not a good idea," she pointed out. It wasn't, strictly speaking, forbidden—but Jason knew, as she did, that to frequent one's old haunts was to risk succumbing to one's old habits. He had slipped once—and LaCroix's beating had been far more severe than the one Spyder had received for her transgression; Jason hadn't been able to get out of bed for two days.

She could see, from the look on his face, that he remembered it vividly. "I won't do that," he said firmly. "I just get so sick of these four walls, and

you're working all the time..." Suddenly, his face brightened. "I'll go to the ball game down at the Skydome!" he said eagerly. "I'll come straight back afterwards, and I won't do nothin' stupid... whaddaya say, Spyder?" he cajoled. "Can I?"

Spyder thought it over. "Lemme ask the Boss," she decided.

She had never been invited to LaCroix's private sanctum, where he took shelter from the sun, but she had the phone number; he didn't like being awakened, he never did, but she'd learned long ago that it was better to get his opinion in advance than to make a choice that might displease him later.

Sleepy-voiced and more than a little grouchy, he gave his assent; and Spyder hung up the phone and crossed the living room to the ornate onyx-inlaid box where the household 'petty cash' was kept. She had long since grown inured to the sight, but Jason's eyes still widened at the crumpled bills that tumbled forth from the overstuffed box, none of them smaller than a twenty. LaCroix refilled the box as it emptied, often commenting that it was a good thing neither mortal knew the true meaning of extravagance, and making references to someone named Janette and her legendary shopping expeditions...

"Here," she said, and handed him a fifty. "Get yourself a ticket and a couple of hot dogs. Nothing else, you hear? Not even a beer, or I swear, Jay, by the time I get through with you, there won't be anything left for the Boss to flatten!"

The young man shuddered elaborately. "I'm not stupid enough to get you both mad at me at once," he remarked, "at least, not again, eh? Trust me, Spyder..."

"I do, sorta," she acknowledged, "but I also know how hard it can be to resist. Straight to the Skydome and right home afterwards, y'hear me?"

"I hear you, I hear you!" He snatched up the money, darted forward to give Spyder a brief kiss, then dashed off.

"Hey, what about the carpet?" she shouted at him, but he was already through the door.

With a sigh, Spyder finished the vacuuming herself.

It was just past sunset when she got the call from Metro Homicide, telling her that Jason had never made it to the game; he'd been stabbed and killed, two blocks away from the Skydome.

"That's him," Spyder said dully.

The coroner made a move to cover his face with the sheet; Spyder's hand shot out to stop her. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the pale, still face. "Jason," she moaned, and burst into tears.

She was dimly aware of the coroner leading her to a chair, rubbing her shoulders comfortingly, speaking soothing words. None of it mattered. Another of her companions was dead, this one most unfairly. And LaCroix didn't even know yet; and what would he say when he was told?

"Spyder, I'm so sorry about your brother," the woman was saying, for that was the cover that LaCroix had provided for Jason. "I lost my brother, too—he was murdered, just as yours was."

She gazed at the coroner, remembering her dimly from one of the many homeless shelters she'd frequented. One of the volunteers, 'Doctor Nat', who despite her sarcastic wit was well-loved by the shelter's inhabitants. She had a quiet beauty that Spyder admired and envied, and compassion sparkled in her lovely eyes along with tears.

"It's not fair!" Spyder wailed.

"I know," murmured Doctor Nat, and gathered her close.

It was the next best thing to resting in LaCroix's arms, and Spyder was upset enough to abandon pride in favor of solace. She could feel the woman's warmth, hear her heartbeat: it reminded her vaguely of how it had felt to be close to Jason, after months of her master's coolness. But that heartbeat was irrevocably stilled, and the thought started her tears anew.

"I loved him," Spyder whispered, discovering the fact for the first time; she'd only ever admitted to affection before.

"I know." Somehow, the pain in the coroner's voice helped: so Spyder was not the only one to know this agony. Heartbreak was apparently not limited to HIV-positive ex-junkie street kids—beautiful scientist-types could suffer from it, too.

She forced herself to calm down, pulled herself together with an effort. "I gotta go," she muttered, thinking only of LaCroix, and what she would say to him.

"You can't leave in this state," protested Doctor Nat.

Another voice chimed in—not the uniformed officer who'd brought her to the morgue, but another male voice, soft and uncommonly gentle. "I'm afraid I need to ask you a few questions."

Spyder sniffled and rubbed at her eyes, not caring that her makeup was smeared across her face. "Yeah, what?" she demanded, not in the mood to deal with any cop's interrogation.

And looked up, at his face.

She'd seen old pictures, paintings and photographs and the odd sketch, and although the hair was shorter than in most, she recognized him immediately. Spyder choked back laughter: it was so ironic, so appropriate

somehow, that she should encounter him here and now.

"I'm Detective Knight," he said, barely drowning out the voice in her head that shouted, *Nicholas!* in blank surprise. "I'm investigating your brother's homicide."

Valiantly, Spyder struggled to remember her cover story, to forget that she knew who and what this man was. And in fact, it was simple: other matters crowded into her consciousness. "What happened?" she cried. "He was just supposed to be going to a baseball game! How did this happen to him?"

Detective Knight (as he was calling himself) sighed heavily, looking genuinely unhappy. "The street was fairly crowded at the time, yet the killer apparently made some effort to target Jason—so we're proceeding on the assumption that your brother was deliberately chosen. Do you have any idea why anyone might want to do this?"

Spyder considered. Normally, she loathed cops, but this was different: he was one of LaCroix's children, bound to be different from the run-of-the-mill pig. And their cover stories had had to parallel reality to a significant degree, just to be able to hold up during a medical exam; no reason not to tell the truth about this. "Jason was a junkie," she said bluntly, "and a hustler. And HIV-positive. I got him to clean up his act, but... not so long ago. Who might've wanted to kill him? One of his old dealers, if he owed 'em money. One of his customers, if the guy came up positive in an AIDS test." She shrugged hopelessly. "Anybody."

No surprise on either of their faces—but then, Doctor Nat, at least, must've already discerned that part of the story. As with any street kid, the scarring told the whole tale...

'Detective Knight' hesitated, glancing at the coroner, then spoke up unwillingly. "Spyder," he said gently, "there was heroin in his bloodstream when he died—and a fresh packet in his pocket."

She felt herself crumbling. *Damn you, Jason, you just had to screw up, didn't'cha?* "Damn," she heard herself moan, as the tears began again.

The coroner's arm around her shoulders; and another hand on her face, brushing away her tears with exquisite gentleness. "I'm sorry," she heard Nicholas say, in a voice that indicated he meant it.

Compassion. Sincere caring. Would LaCroix care? Spyder thought he probably wouldn't. After all, what was it to him, other than the loss of a pet? A minor inconvenience? He might be annoyed over the waste of perfectly good blood—but would he feel the same pain that emanated so strongly from his protégé? Hardly.

And yet, the detective's concern left her cold; Spyder longed for the non-consolation of LaCroix's imperturbable presence.

"I wanna go home now," she sobbed. "Please let me go home..."

"I'll give you a lift," Nicholas offered, and with no other option, Spyder accepted.

The car was just as the Boss had described it: big and old, and the most hideous shade of green she'd ever seen. There was powdered sugar spilled over the passenger seat, and an old paper coffee cup lying discarded on the floor.

And Nicholas, emitting silent sympathy as he drove her home.

He was more of an enigma to Spyder now than he'd ever been. The tales she'd heard... Sometimes, when LaCroix had sated himself with her body and blood, when he was in just the right sort of mellow mood, Spyder could coax him into reminiscence. Along with sagas of ancient Rome and such, she'd heard a great deal about his vampire 'family', his daughter and his son. Janette, of the infamous shopping trips, now gone off to 'reinvent herself'; and Nicholas, who was (stupidly, according to LaCroix) struggling for rebirth in a human form. Once savage and filled with ruthless hunger, now subdued and tamed by his longing for mortality—LaCroix had often spoken of the man Nicholas had once been, of that exuberant, impetuous, mischievous youth, with wistful fondness.

For the man he was now, for the facade of Nick Knight, LaCroix had nothing but scorn.

But Nicholas had been awfully nice to her—and now he was driving her home. Spyder had developed, in her years as a juvenile delinquent, an instinctive fear and loathing of policemen; getting into the car with the uniformed cop had given her the shakes something awful. Nick, though, was giving her a whole new perspective on cops.

And on vampires: it was almost impossible to believe he was one.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Spyder asked, breaking the silence, just out of curiosity: she already knew the answer.

"I have... family," Nick answered finally. "A sister," he amended, after a moment. The words didn't come easily to him; though technically his 'sister', Janette had always been more of a lover than a sibling, according to the one who'd created them both.

She knew that the subject was painful, as evidenced by the swift twinge of agony that creased his face at the words; something inside Spyder needed to provoke pain in another, as if it could somehow assuage her own torment. In that, she and LaCroix were very much alike...

So much alike, and in so many ways, that she was surprised Nicholas hadn't discerned their bond at once.

"I'll never see my brother again," she said, knowing that here was one person who might understand. Nicholas would be reunited with Janette, someday, but Jason was lost to her forever...

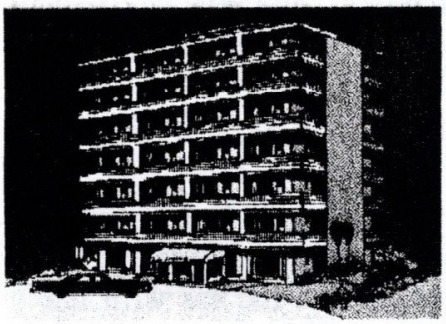
"I'm sorry," murmured Nick, and the look on his face said that he'd reached the same realization, and felt genuinely guilty about his comparative good fortune.

Studying him closely, Spyder could discern the faintest traces of the

erstwhile Nicolas de Brabant: a hint of mischief, of ruthlessness, of cruelty. Yet there was such gentleness there now, too... Here was a vampire who might actually love a human, rather than ensnaring one for her blood. Here was a vampire with all the compassion she knew she would never find in another.

Somehow, on the whole, she preferred LaCroix. He was wonderfully consistent, unlike his son (how could a vampire cop be anything but unpredictable?) and he was as lavish with rewards as with his punishments. With LaCroix, Spyder always knew where she stood. With Nicholas, who cloaked his vampiric nature with all sorts of psychological subterfuge... how could anyone ever know? Years of sudden and unprovoked abuse had left her with a lingering distaste for surprise mood swings.

Still, there was something about Nick's subtle sympathy that was awfully appealing at that particular moment.



When he pulled into the driveway of her lakeside condo and shifted gears into 'park', she fell into his arms crying before she quite knew what she was doing; and Nicholas held her securely, allowed her to sob into his shirt. The slight tension in his body told her that he was very aware of the thundering rush of blood through her veins, and trying desperately not to be: distantly, she wondered if LaCroix had ever bothered with such restraint, for any reason.

After her tears had tapered off, and she'd snuffled into a raggedy tissue from the glove compartment, he escorted her to the lobby entrance. "I'll keep you informed on our progress," Nick told her. "If you think of anything that might help us, or if there's anything I can do..."

"Thanks," said Spyder, longing now to be free of him; she nodded a brief farewell, trotted past the doorman and inside.

Even before the elevator reached her level, she knew that he was there.

He glanced at her as she let herself in, and his eyes were searing flame; she realized then that he'd already learned of Jason's demise.

"How could I not know?" he hissed. "Linked to me by blood... I felt him die."

There was nothing she could say to that, so she kept quiet.

"I understand that Nicholas is handling the case," he continued, more calmly.

"Uh-huh. He said he'd do everything he could t-to find the k-killer..." Spyder's tenuous control broke, releasing the tears again; she rushed to his side, wrapped her arms around him and clung to him desperately, crying helplessly.

LaCroix held her, and his solid unyielding strength was the most

comforting thing she'd ever known. He made no deliberate attempt to console her, offered no meaningless platitudes or sympathetic clichés—he merely held her, and that was enough. More than enough.

"You won't die," she sobbed, barely coherent. "I won't lose you, not ever..."

"No," he agreed, "you won't," and something in his tone made her look up at him.

His eyes were too bright, signifying that the bloodlust was taking hold, and fury melted and merged with something else to create an indecipherable expression. "It's time for you to join me," he growled.

"No!" For the first time ever, Spyder pushed him away. "Not yet," she pleaded, "not now! I'm not done growing yet... my hair is too short... and I hardly even have breasts!"

Sardonic humor broke through the bloodfever briefly. "I assure you," he said, "you have lovely breasts."

"A-cups," said Spyder grimly. "I wanna get to B-cups, at least... Why now, Boss, why so soon? I thought you said you wouldn't even consider bringing me over 'til I was twenty..."

"I will not lose you!" he raged fiercely.

Spyder stared at him, numbly. Slowly, realization dawned. That other emotion, the one warring with the anger inside him—it was fear, pure and simple. And why would he be so afraid of losing her, when Jason's death had barely fazed him?

Why, indeed.

She gazed up at him and drew a deep, shaky breath; the sudden surge of warmth inside her brought tears to the fore once again. The look on his face—behind the rage, and the fear, and the venom, and the possessive pride, lay...

Spyder smiled. "I love you, too," she murmured.

He didn't deign to acknowledge her statement, or what it implied—but his arms tightened around her, and she melted into his embrace.

Sometime later, LaCroix spoke. "Nicholas has become a pathetic excuse for a vampire," he said, resuming their conversation as if there had been no interruption, "but he's a rather good detective. If his past record is any indication, he'll surely find the perpetrator."

"And then?" Spyder queried.

"We will exact our revenge; what else?" He eyed her intently. "How long do you want your hair to grow?"

She thought about it. "At least to my elbows," she ventured.

He studied her shoulder-length spiky hair. "That will take some time."

Spyder shrugged. "S'alright," she said. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm not gonna leave you, an' I'm not going to die on you, either." And favored him with a bright, engaging grin. "Not unless you want me to."

LaCroix didn't comment on that, either, only tugged at the neckline of her shirt so that he could get to the vein—and his urgency was such that he tore the garment in the process.

She didn't get to sleep for many, many hours.

When she awoke, she found a tray on the bedside table, bearing a slice of cold leftover pizza (no garlic) and a liter bottle of Pepsi. Her favorite form of breakfast; being both hungry and thirsty (perfectly normal, after the depletion of bodily fluids that she'd sustained) she began consuming both eagerly.

As she came to full consciousness, it occurred to her that in all the months of their acquaintance, LaCroix had never brought her anything: the task of personal servant generally fell to her. She wondered what brief, tender impulse had caused him to do such a thing, and felt warmed by that sign of concern.

If he had been Nicholas, she wouldn't have thought about it twice—but he was LaCroix, and so inherently self-centered that even the smallest sign of thoughtfulness was a momentous thing, cheering her tremendously.

In fact, their interlude of blood-taking and lovemaking had so brightened her outlook that she could not have summoned tears if she'd tried.

Meal finished, she rose and shrugged into her bathrobe, noticing as she did that Jason's robe had been removed from the rack; as she visited the bathroom, she saw that all signs of his previous residency had been expunged as well. Her own toilet articles had been rearranged to cover the lack. No painful reminders lying around to haunt her—another thoughtful little touch, a consideration she'd not expected.

A cold-water shower chased away her lingering fatigue and weakness; she was always a little shaky after LaCroix fed, and he'd taken a great deal more than usual the night before. It was a nice sort of shakiness, though, as pleasantly reassuring as the vague aches in her thighs.

The bathroom mirror gave her a good view of the wound: a sizable hickey, surrounding two neat little circular scars. Funny how the fang marks always faded swiftly, leaving only the reddish bruises of his kisses.

Last night, another first: at one point, Spyder had been so aroused that she'd bitten a chunk out of his shoulder. He hadn't seemed to mind—and the sensation of his vampiric blood hitting her tongue had catapulted her into a region of pleasure that far surpassed ecstasy; she'd nearly lost consciousness from it.

Afterwards, she'd watched his shoulder heal in utter fascination. "You really are immortal," she'd murmured.

"But of course." So soft, his velvet voice, slurred with satisfaction and uncommonly gentle. Only during such moments of afterglow could Spyder

catch him in this sort of mood, and it was so lovely to rest in his arms...

"You would really do it?" she'd wondered aloud. "You would make me immortal?"

He'd glanced at her with one of his "I said what I said and I'm not repeating myself" looks—and answered her anyway. "Yes, Spyder."

"You wanna spend eternity with me?" The concept was foreign to her: so many people had rejected her that such unlimited acceptance was more than she could comprehend.

"Eternity is rarely as long as we think it will be." His face had twisted. "There is no way of knowing how long you might survive, or what sort of accident might destroy you along the way. Nor can I predict at what point you will turn on me..."

"I'd never do that!" Spyder had been outraged.

"Certainly you will." LaCroix's voice had been bland, merely stating a fact. "It's in our nature. We are independent creatures; we seek our independence as assiduously as we seek to possess others of our kind." His fingers had caressed her face, in one of those gestures that only emerged during afterglow; she doubted he was aware of them. "You, particularly, will be quite a handful; you're a fierce, feral little thing, Araignette," and the fondness in his voice had delighted her.

"If you're so sure of that," she'd challenged him, "then why are you talking about bringing me over?"

"Oh, I <u>enjoy</u> a challenge." He'd seized her with the casual roughness she so adored, and she'd felt the hunger rising within him again, striking a resonant chord within her own soul: she wanted him, too.

Within his mind, she thought she'd sensed an addition to his statement: *challenge, yes, and so much more...* ***j'ai succombé à l'amour, et il va détruire mon âme,*** which meant nothing to her except for the fervor that accompanied the unfamiliar words, and the passion with which he'd taken her afterwards.

I'm gonna have to learn French, Spyder mused, *if he's gonna be <u>thinking</u> in it all the time,* and stumbled into the other room.

The sun hadn't set yet; the windows were securely barriered against the light. He was sitting on the couch, tapping at keys on his laptop and speaking into the phone cradled against his ear. She caught references to stock options, and guessed that he was talking to one of his brokers or accountants—the man had more money than some countries, and liked to keep a close watch on what it was doing.

She could have taken a seat on the couch beside him, but instead Spyder curled up on the carpet by his feet, and rested her head on his knee. *Pet, yeah,* she thought, *I'm his pet. But hey, people sometimes love their pets, don't they?*

His hand left the computer keyboard, settled instead on top of her head, stroking her hair absently. Those hands could be so affectionate, when their power wasn't being used to wound or punish...

He loves me, Spyder thought, serenely happy. *In his own way, and subject to his whims... but he loves me. I never imagined...*

During a pause in his phone conversation, she could feel his eyes on her. "You should have accepted my offer when you had the chance," he said severely. "It would be far simpler to kill you, and be rid of the inconvenience."

She smiled to herself, and kissed his knee. She knew him well enough to understand: he'd allowed himself to get too close to her, and now he had to place some distance between them. A little coldness, a bit of gratuitous cruelty would restore the status quo. He needed that, to preserve his illusion of absolute power.

Accordingly, his hand shoved her head rudely off his lap. "Get me a bottle," he said sharply, "now."

Spyder couldn't stop grinning. "Yes, Boss," she said happily, and rushed to obey.

"...White Zombie, with More Human Than Human. Next up: Pearl Jam, Pam Tillis and Paganini. But first, traffic, weather, and a few words from our corporate sponsors. Keep it tuned right here, folks."

Spyder muted the stereo mike, leaned back in her chair as the tech set up the cartridges for the commercials. So far, things were going well: she hadn't made any major errors on the air, and preliminary feedback indicated that the diverse musical programming (LaCroix's suggestion) seemed to appeal to CERK's eclectic audience—most of whom listened solely to the Nightcrawler.

But then, up until now, the daytime programming had been erratic, to say the least. Now, more and more listeners were tuning in early, to catch her show...

The phone rang, not the call-in lines but the private one, blinking amber at the edge of her field of vision; and she snagged the receiver with a fluid motion, expecting to hear LaCroix's satiny voice.

Instead, it was another voice, one that (in retrospect) she should have been anticipating. "Spyder Delacruz?"

"Detective Knight," she said, instead of the more familiar **Nicholas** that insisted on springing to her lips. "How'd you get this number?" Best to play innocent, for the time being.

"I, ah, know someone at the station." Good: now he was on the defensive, instead of the other way 'round.

"Anyone I know?" She was enjoying herself immensely; it occurred to her that LaCroix would no doubt enjoy this game as well.

"Probably not." Nicholas was silent for a moment. "We have a lead on your case."

"Do you?" All thoughts of games were instantly driven from her mind. "Is he under arrest?"

"No, no, not yet. The test results haven't come in yet. I just wanted to let you know that we're making progress."

"Well, thank you—thanks a lot!" Spyder was genuinely grateful, though not for the reasons Nicholas might think. Arrest, imprisonment: those things were too good for Jason's murderer. But once she knew who'd done it, she could tell LaCroix...

He'd promised her the opportunity for revenge, and she knew it was a promise he would keep.

"How are you holding up?" There was sympathy in Nick's voice, warming her with its genuine concern—yet a greater part of her remained untouched. Her loyalties lay elsewhere. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Spyder debated for a long moment: ;the temptation was overpowering, and in the end, she succumbed. "Well... I-I could really use someone to t-talk to," she said, with just the right quaver in her voice.

"Say no more. What time do you get off work? I'll come and pick you up."

"Seven o'clock," she told him, just to see how he'd react.

There was a momentary hesitation. "I can be there at seven-thirty," he said; fifteen minutes past sunset.

"Fine," said Spyder; LaCroix wouldn't be in until eight or nine, no chance of them running into each other by accident. "You have the address?" she questioned, just to maintain the illusion.

"I know where the station is," Nick said, rather grimly.

She waited for him outside, watching day fade into dusk, until finally he showed up in his puke-green car. He was really pushing the envelope, for the sky was still vaguely lit to the west, and his dark sunglasses showed that he was sensitive to the glow. That compassion again, evoking a strange tenderness in Spyder. He truly cared, this one did, enough to risk his precious immortal skin so that he might console a total stranger...

"I miss him so much," she said into the silence. "I still can't believe he's gone." This part was neither game nor subterfuge: the pain was all too real. "He was the sweetest kid, y'know? And so young... he never had the chance to live." Like Sheryl. But Sheryl had known the price of her

betrayal; Jason had simply made a stupid error.

"It isn't fair!" Spyder seethed through clenched teeth, refusing to allow the tears to take over.

Nicholas glanced sideways at her, pulled the car over to the curb; he reached out and slid his arm around her, let Spyder cry on his shoulder without comment.

She found herself sobbing out reminiscences: the way Jason had smiled, had laughed, had always left the cap off the toothpaste. His exuberance, his youthful charm. She relived her brief acquaintance with Jason, wallowing in grief in a way LaCroix had actively discouraged—and all the while Nicholas held her loosely, stroking her hair lightly, letting her get it all out.

Afterwards, he dug tissues out of his glove compartment (Spyder caught a glimpse of a driver's license from the fifties; *tremendously careless of him,* she thought) and dashed from the car to buy her a soda from the convenience store on the corner. As she wiped her eyes and sipped her cola (Diet Pepsi, which she wasn't fond of; she wondered who had trained him to select that brand) Spyder reflected that any mortal pet of Nick's would be fortunate, indeed.

But then, he wasn't the type to keep a human on hand for a ready supply of fresh, willing blood; LaCroix had made it clear in his descriptions that Nicholas was now opposed to such things on moral grounds, though he'd done them often enough in the past.

She wondered if Nicholas realized how much he had to offer: how many doomed mortals, like herself and Jason, would welcome his dark embrace.

He had to go to work, he explained with regret, but he had a friend—did Spyder remember the coroner, Doctor Lambert? Since it probably wasn't a good idea for Spyder to be alone with her misery, he could take her over there; Nat wouldn't mind...

"Sure," said Spyder, "why not?" Having regained control over her treacherous emotions, she was anxious for resumption of the game, and Doctor Nat was certainly another pawn... or maybe Queen, to the Knight; it would be interesting to find out.

Either way, LaCroix was the King, and immune to the concept of 'checkmate'; as invulnerable in life as he was to Spyder during their chess games, in which she was just beginning to get the hang of how the pieces moved.

Chess wasn't an easy game to play, neither the board version or the psychological one... but LaCroix was a very good teacher.

It had never occurred to Nick, obviously, that Doctor Nat's office might hold negative connotations for Spyder, reminders of Jason's corpse... As he greeted the coroner, Spyder understood the oversight: by the looks of it, this was apparently a happy place, in Nick's estimation, a place he'd come

to think of as 'home turf'. She hadn't noticed last time, of course, but now that she had the presence of mind to watch—the way they looked at each other, talked to each other, their body language, all spoke volumes.

Not lovers, but a hell of a lot more than friends.

'Nat' was as compassionate and friendly as she'd been before, welcoming Spyder as if she'd known her for years (when the truth was, the coroner didn't even remember her from the shelter—thank goodness!) When Nick was gone, Nat set her work aside, fixed them cups of coffee and sat with her; they chatted amiably, small talk about work and such. Spyder mentioned her new job at a radio station, but not which one: she had the feeling that Nat wouldn't dismiss the coincidence of her employment as Nick had.

It amazed her that he hadn't made the connection—for a vampire, and a detective to boot, he could be remarkably dense.

She wondered if Nat had the remotest idea of what she was missing, and had the absurd urge to tell her. What it was like to feel the fangs sinking into her neck, the sweet connection of body and soul that came with the flow of blood. The ecstasy of lovemaking combined with that feeding, the electric bliss of vampiric blood on the tongue. Instinct told Spyder that Nick had never taken her in that way; she wondered if Nat would reject that inhuman pleasure, or revel in it as she herself did.

Spyder didn't pay attention to the technician who entered with a stack of paperwork; not until Nat, leafing through the sheaf, said suddenly, "The results of the tests on your case are in," and picked up the phone to call Nick.

She glanced at the sheet in question, memorized the name written next to the damning words 'positive match'; and while Nat was distracted, slipped out of the office with almost preternatural stealth. LaCroix was no doubt at the station by now...

She clung to LaCroix as they flew high above the city, enjoying the adrenaline thrill of soaring through skyscraper canyons despite the grimness of the errand that had taken her to that lofty spot. She'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail, for LaCroix disliked it when her loose hair blew in his face and conveyed the smell and taste of hairspray and setting gel; but the short bits at the front still ruffled in the wind.

Far below, the bustle of city traffic; her merely human eyes couldn't track the tiny speck of putrid green, but LaCroix's attention had not left Nick's car since they had begun trailing it, outside the precinct.

And so it was that Nick led them straight to the culprit's apartment building; the detective, in his human masquerade, was constrained by his

need to take the elevator. LaCroix had no such restrictions: he entered through the window, and Spyder hid her face against his shoulder to protect herself from the shattering glass.

Their intended victim was caught completely unaware: LaCroix let go of Spyder so abruptly that she stumbled and fell to the floor, and she looked up to see her master springing on the hapless mortal in a swift blur of black.

"Is it him?" she asked, relying on his preternatural perception to confirm the fact.

"It's him." He held the man's arms immobile behind him; the middle-aged guy was too terrified by the glowing eyes and fangs to struggle or scream.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Spyder said impatiently. "Take him!"

"Ah, non, ma chérie." LaCroix's voice was ever so soft. "I leave the matter of our vengeance in your so-capable hands." With his free hand (it only took him one to restrain the man, with his superior strength) he extended something to her: a dagger, shining and sharp, held out hilt-first.

Spyder took it, examined the antique for a moment, giving herself time to think. LaCroix was granting her a boon, as he saw it; as well, she was aware that he wanted to know that she was capable of murder, that she would not be constrained by such tiresome concepts as morality or guilt or shame. That she would accept that aspect of the immortality he was considering granting her.

She had never seen herself as a killer, had never particularly wanted to be... but this was the man who'd murdered Jason; what could be more appropriate than returning the favor in kind? Rage burned inside her, fierce and unwavering—and if a spark of human empathy existed beneath that bright blaze, Spyder did not choose to acknowledge it.

The dagger was a beautiful weapon—but Spyder had never much liked weapons; in a fight, they could be taken away and used against her by her opponent. Accordingly, she'd learned how to retaliate without such aids.

Now defensive techniques would be utilized in an attack; she tucked the dagger carefully into her boot and advanced toward the man with clenched fists.

The abuse she'd sustained had taught her how to inflict maximum pain with minimum effort, and she beat the man carefully and methodically. When he was no longer capable of resistance, LaCroix released him, let him sprawl to the floor; he stepped back, into the shadows, and watched her administer punishment to the victim in much the same way LaCroix had disciplined her, the single time that it had been necessary for him to do so in that manner.

Spyder glanced up at him once, saw approval reflected in his face, and a desire akin to the bloodlust that consumed his features so frequently;

obviously, he was savoring the sight of her violence, and the thought of what would inevitably occur once they were alone together made her tingle all through.

Finally, their victim was nearly unconscious, and Spyder sat back on her haunches to admire her handiwork. *Finish him,* came LaCroix's directive, and she withdrew the dagger from her boot and gleefully prepared to obey.

"Don't move," came a strident voice from the doorway, and she looked up to see Nicholas standing there, gun drawn.

He blinked, registered her identity. "Spyder," he said, almost sorrowfully. "This isn't the way to avenge your brother's death."

"Oh, no, you're wrong," she breathed, unafraid of the weapon pointed directly at her. "This is exactly the way to avenge Jason."

"You don't have to do this," Nick coaxed. "We have solid evidence against him, he'll be put away for a good long time..."

"That's not good enough!" she retorted. "He deserves to die..."

"No one deserves to die," returned Nicholas inexorably. "Spyder, you're not a murderer!"

"Yeah," Spyder said placidly, "I suppose it takes one to know one, right?"

And exactly on cue, LaCroix stepped out of the shadows behind her, into the light.

Startlement flickered across Nick's face, replaced quickly by horror. "Spyder, move! Get out of the way!" he called out sharply, and for a moment she was puzzled—then realized that he meant to protect her from the 'danger' of LaCroix.

The thought made her laugh; it was so far from the truth.

She didn't say a word—simply stood, glanced up at LaCroix, and then back at Nick expectantly, making no move to flee from her master's side.

His bafflement gradually mutated into dawning realization—she could see Nick (finally!) putting it all together: Spyder Delacruz, working at CERK, all the little details he hadn't taken note of before. *Duh,* she thought dryly, *and this is a detective?*

"Why?" he whispered in disbelief. "Spyder, why?" Apparently, the very idea of a human allying herself willingly with a vampire, especially that vampire, was so unthinkable that it was beyond his comprehension.

"'Cause I like it like that," she said saucily, basking as always in the wonderful glow that she felt when she was with LaCroix.

Nick shook his head savagely. "You don't know what you're doing!" he said urgently.

"I know exactly what I'm doing," she countered firmly.

"You don't know LaCroix..."

"I know him better than you do!" Spyder shot back; and she could feel LaCroix's small smile of agreement.

Could see, in Nick's eyes, that he was utterly rejecting the concept that it might be true. After all, he'd known LaCroix for eight centuries; how could some young upstart mortal possibly be more knowledgeable about his master's unique personality?

It ain't time that matters, honey, she thought, *it's being in tune with each other...*

Kindred souls, she felt LaCroix commenting in her head. *How true, my dear. But save your breath; he will never understand.*

The man on the floor moaned, bringing the trio back to the matter at hand. "Time for our vengeance," said her master's smooth voice.

"I will not allow it," said Nick steadily.

LaCroix laughed. "And just how do you intend to prevent it? Exactly how do you think you will stop me?"

"I can't," Nick responded quietly. "But I can stop her."

"You will have to go through me to do it," was LaCroix's answer, soft and deadly.

"Hardly. All I have to do is wait for the sunrise. Have a warrant issued for her arrest. She's not a part of our world, LaCroix," and hidden in that statement was an unspoken question: *what do you want with her? you, with your contempt for mortals?* "She belongs to their world, and they will be the ones to punish her for her actions. Which will happen whether I intervene or not."

"You think so?" The hint of a snarl in his tone belied his cool defiance. "Kill him, Spyder," LaCroix urged—but there was a false note in his voice.

Spyder thought about it. Looked at Nick, then at LaCroix. And came to the only decision she could.

"Jason belonged to you," she said to her master. "You should be the one to take him."

Ice blue eyes narrowed at her, containing the faint traces of a smile. If Spyder killed the guy, Nicholas would be duty-bound to subject her to the rigors of the judicial system, and of course LaCroix would not let that happen—and of course Nicholas would blame LaCroix for that, as he blamed LaCroix for everything. If LaCroix took the man, Nick would still blame him, but he would be unable to take any direct action... it was a graceful way of backing down without losing any ground, or losing face as he would if Spyder were to openly defy him in front of Nicholas.

Not to mention, there would be no wasting of perfectly good blood.

An elegant solution, and she could see that he approved.

"It is," said LaCroix, "my prerogative."

His arm curled around Spyder's shoulders: not an affectionate gesture but a possessive one, as blatant as if she were wearing a leash. "But what would cause the most suffering, I wonder?" he mused. "A quick death is too good for this one, I fear," and with shock, she realized that he was going

to concede to Nicholas, let the vampire detective handle this his own way.

But if LaCroix were to give up his chance for revenge, what purpose had all this served? Spyder considered it for only a moment, found her answer. LaCroix had demonstrated, quite clearly, that he could interfere in Nick's life at any time he chose, and Nick was powerless to stop him; that Nick was only playing at being a police detective because he, LaCroix was magnanimously allowing him to. As blatant a demonstration of ownership as the arm wrapped around Spyder's shoulders.

She glanced up at LaCroix, with only a tiny bit of annoyance (she had really wanted to see the guy dead) mingled with her affection. Nicholas might balk at LaCroix's leash, but she herself was perfectly happy where she was.

The detective was watching her, looking unhappy... and more than a little hurt. Well, she could relate to that: she'd betrayed him, in a way, by taking his sympathy and caring and never repaying him with the truth. And though she couldn't comprehend him, she did sorta like him: he was nice, and that was something she'd rarely encountered in her brief lifetime.

One long look up at LaCroix, just to be certain he understood what she was doing. "Nick," said Spyder, and took a step away from the elder vampire's side.

LaCroix could have held her in place effortlessly, but he let her go. *Another bone thrown to Nicholas,* he was no doubt thinking, and that was fine, 'cause part of her motivation was to protect her master... but another part was the fact that although Spyder had never been noted for empathy, she just couldn't bear the wounded look in those blue eyes.

"You were there for me when Jason died," she said in a quiet, soft voice. "You were good to me. I just... I just wanted to thank you for that."

Nick only nodded curtly, but some of the hurt faded from his eyes.

LaCroix's hand settled on her shoulder again. "Time to fly, Araignette," he said mildly. "Let's let the policeman 'apprehend' his subject." Sharply, to Nicholas. "You had better see to it that he is convicted and jailed. Be assured, if I don't find his punishment severe enough, I'll inflict one of my own."

"Yes, LaCroix," Nick said wearily, in a tone that indicated he had endured about all he could take for one evening, and wanted nothing more than to go home and submerge himself in a half-liter of Natalie... no, this was Nicholas; with him, it would be a half-bottle of cow's blood.

Poor Doctor Nat, Spyder thought, *she doesn't know what she's missing.*

She went to LaCroix, and his arms wrapped around her, and in a flash they were off, through the shattered window and into the sky.

The initial collision with the glass had opened a few tiny scrapes in her skin, and from the start LaCroix had been acutely aware of the scent of her fresh blood, though he'd given no sign during the confrontation. Spyder

felt a shadowy subliminal echo of his hunger, more intense and urgent than usual; he was always at his best after a battle fought and won. She suspected—no, knew—that the interlude to come would be particularly superb.

He was thinking, and letting her hear the thoughts. *It's been a while since I had a little girl to raise,* passed through his mind reflectively. *You're as cunning and vicious as Janette at her best. Certainly worthy of my... long-term attention.*

Spyder smiled, feeling nothing but love for the demon-creature propelling her through the night sky. *Nicholas won't like that,* she pointed out pragmatically.

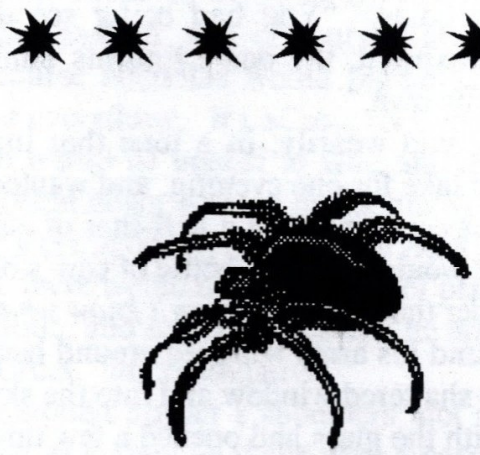
And I am supposed to care what Nicholas likes? LaCroix laughed out loud, but the sound of it was lost in the wind. *Araignette, we will conduct our affairs as it suits us,* and she didn't miss his use of the plural pronoun, where always before it had been simply 'I'.

Had she ever in her life been so filled to bursting with rapturous contentment? Had any of the men who'd owned or commanded her given her such a feeling of safety, security? Had she ever found peace of mind while on her own?

And now, he was giving her far more than food and shelter and money and companionship. Now, he was actually making a commitment. He'd pretty much made it clear that he planned to bring her over—and she'd seen how attached he was to his family; that commitment would be forever.

She could think of nothing more wondrous, more utterly perfect, than the prospect of spending eternity by LaCroix's side.

Spyder turned her face into the swift breeze, and let the rushing air dry the tears of happiness that rolled merrily down her cheeks.



Part Two

Prologue

She glanced at herself in the mirror, admiring the snow-white streak in her jet-black hair. It had taken three applications of dye before her hair had surrendered fully to the bleach; her master and sometime-roommate had complained incessantly of the chemical odor wafting through the apartment. Once it was done, he'd seemed to like it—he had told her that it was a striking look, and for him, that was the equivalent of hearts and flowers and mushy romance.

Spyder disliked sentimentality: she was satisfied with the snide comments and sardonic quips that indicated LaCroix had not yet lost interest in his mortal 'pet'.

Hair, makeup, dress—a lacy, low-cut clinging thing that he had selected for her some time ago, when he'd decided that her wardrobe needed to reflect a more mature look—everything was perfect: and a good thing, too, for sunset was darkening into night, and he was bound to be there at any moment. Granted, when he was hungry enough, she could be wearing a garbage bag and greasepaint and he'd barely notice... but he liked it when she went to some trouble to prepare for his arrival, and so she did so whenever her schedule permitted. It reminded her of her long-ago days as a prostitute, when she'd worked out of Freddy's place off Sherbourne, and priming herself for the next john—except that her heart had never sung with joy at the anticipated arrival of her customers, the way it did at the very thought of her master.

Twenty-two days and an odd number of hours since she'd seen him last, an unendurably long interval; she could barely wait to see him again.

A sudden subliminal signal on the balcony alerted her, and her pulse quickened with excitement; she hurried to the sliding door and smoothed down her scrap of a skirt as he let himself in.

His head tilted to one side, perplexed. "No music?"

"I thought you hated the stuff I play," Spyder retorted.

"I loathe it. However, I've come to associate it with you; that makes it bearable. Music," he directed, moving toward the couch, and she rushed to the stereo and rummaged for a CD.

"AC/DC?" she asked him.

"Perfectly dreadful," he agreed, seating himself, and she popped the disk into the machine, watched with amusement as his foot began tapping absently in time with the hard-driving rhythm.

His eyes were fastened on her as she danced idly across the living room to the sofa, to take her accustomed place at his side. "I hadn't thought to actually see you wearing that dress," he mentioned.

She beamed. "Went shopping today," she told him proudly. "An' guess what? I've finally grown enough to fill out a B-cup."

"Congratulations," LaCroix said with a smirk. "And how are we to celebrate this momentous occasion?"

"Oh, any way you want, Boss," she said happily.

"Any way I want," he mused, as his hands caressed the area in question. "Well, let me think. There are so many possibilities... Shall we go to the zoo?" he inquired, straight-faced and utterly polite. "I could buy you an ice cream cone..."

Spyder laughed, and hit him lightly; and LaCroix gathered her in his arms and held her close.

His lips met hers, and she could feel the sharp points of his emerging fangs; the sensation provoked a wave of intense desire that promised to engulf her, as always. She had never been afraid of him, no matter how often she'd witnessed the viciousness of which he was capable; no matter what he might do to others, no matter what he might do to her, she couldn't view him with anything but love.

Kindred souls, he'd said once, inside her head where no one else would hear—and every passing night reconfirmed the truth of that thought. An ancient Roman vampire and a sixteen-year-old HIV-positive street urchin; they couldn't have been more different... and yet in a very basic way, they were exactly the same.

She allowed herself to melt against him, to yield to him the way she'd never dared give herself to another. "LaCroix," she moaned, giving his name the unAnglicized pronunciation she'd only just mastered, "*dépêche-toi, je te veux...*"

"My little illiterate is learning French," he said fondly. "Patience, Araignette..."

"As if you're ever patient when <u>you</u> want something!" Spyder snarled.

Genuine startlement lit his face, mutating swiftly to smug pleasure. "I ought to make you beg," he contemplated aloud. "What a rich irony that would be..."

"Get bent," she shot back—then restrained her frustration with an effort. "C'mon," Spyder said softly, "have a heart, willya? Three weeks you're gone, no warning, no phone call, no nothing, an' I'm worried sick about you... then, when I've bitten my fingernails down to stumps," and she displayed the wounded digits for his inspection, "all of a sudden I get your call, 'hi honey I'm coming home for dinner' and nothing else... y'know, I've never pried into your business, like where you go and what you do when you're not with me; I've never asked you for nothin', but just to be with you..." She sighed heavily. "I have missed you, Boss."

A small smile found its way to his face. *And I you,* said LaCroix—not aloud, but in the privacy of their growing bond, where such intimacies could be more easily expressed. *All the more reason to savor the experience, don't you think?*

But he didn't keep her waiting any longer; and Spyder heard herself moan with passion as his fangs penetrated the tender skin of her neck.

She knew from the first moment that something was wrong: the connection that came with the flow of her blood was vastly deeper than their telepathic bond, so much so that he couldn't hide it from her any longer. Not desire but desperation, and something she had never before sensed in his formidable psyche: fear—tightly suppressed, but there nonetheless.

Spyder didn't understand... but then, she didn't need to understand. For months now, every aspect of her life had been devoted to satisfying LaCroix's needs. Now, she sought to wipe away his anxiety in the only way she knew: with her own surrender, total and complete.

Normally, that was enough. This time, it wasn't: when his fangs withdrew from her neck, she could still feel the desperation gnawing at him for the brief moment before the blood-bond severed.

"All right," she said, some moments later, when his thought patterns had calmed to coherence, "what's going on, Boss?"

He feigned a surprised expression—but he was slipping: she could see right through the bland look, and discern the apprehension beneath.

"I know you," said Spyder, letting her hand glide across his

chest, enjoying the silken texture of the expensive shirt and considering stripping it off him. "This isn't normal behavior for you, and we both know it. C'mon, Boss, after all this time, don't you trust me... even a little?"

"Trust is not the issue," he said softly. "Araignette, it's nothing you need concern yourself with."

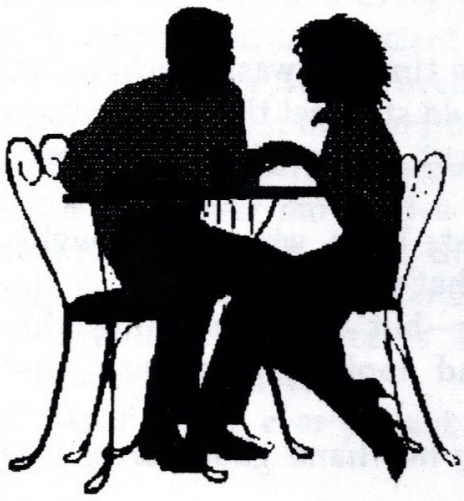
"If it concerns you, it concerns me!" she retorted, growing more frightened with every passing second. In the past, he'd deflected inappropriate curiosity with threats of the vampire Enforcers and cold silence: this particular argument was a new one. As was his manner—almost as if he <u>wanted</u> her to pry the secret out of him.

"<u>Tell</u> me!" she begged. "LaCroix, what's going on?"

And with a long, long sigh, he told her.

Nat was shopping in Eaton Centre, lugging shopping bags toward one of the convenient banks of lockers nearby, where she could stash her purchases and thus prepare for another foray through the mall... She'd just gotten the raise she'd been looking forward to, and an unexpected dividend check from one of her investments, and she was feeling moderately good; the thunderstorm that had greeted her upon awakening had not dampened her high spirits. *I'm going out,* she'd decided, *what's a little rain?* and the streetcars and subways had obligingly taken her to the underground complex of stores and restaurants and connecting tunnels that spanned half of downtown.

It had been a good morning, a satisfying and uneventful morning: the last thing, the very last thing she expected, was to encounter Spyder and LaCroix.



They were sitting at a table in the food court, in a moderately uncrowded spot; shopping bags were scattered around the floor by their feet. Even from a distance, there was no mistaking them: Spyder's hair was as raven-black and spiky as ever except for the fashionable white streak, though she'd grown thinner and much paler. *Of course,* Nat thought sarcastically, *being a vampire's chew toy has to take its toll...* And LaCroix was LaCroix, clearly and unquestionably, from any distance and

in any situation.

Even if he was wearing a sweatshirt and blue jeans, and holding a cup of what appeared to be cappuccino...

Fascinated, Nat sidled behind a concealing plant and studied the pair. Watched as LaCroix brought the cup to his lips and pretended to sip from it... a masterful act; no ignorant stranger would have noticed anything amiss. He paused before setting the cup down, seemed to inhale the fragrance with pleasure—*is it the lighting in here,* Nat wondered, *or is he a shade or two rosier than usual?*

Not that she had much experience to go on; she had met the elder vampire exactly once, and her memory of that night was still sketchy. Yet somehow, intuitively, Nat sensed that this LaCroix was not the same man she'd faced at the restaurant. Still as cool and self-possessed as ever, but something had changed, something vital...

And Spyder did not look happy. She scowled down at her burger and fries as he spoke to her; Nat was too far away to hear, but LaCroix's face seemed calm. The girl's countenance, on the other hand, darkened with an impending thunderstorm to rival the one raging outside.

All at once, her hand slammed down on the table, causing her fast-food meal to tremble; she leaned forward and spoke urgently to her companion, and though Nat could not discern the words, her tone held a shrill edge of anxiety. The girl reached out, clutched at his arm beseechingly...

Whatever Spyder was saying, LaCroix was having none of it. He shook off her grip and half-turned away, his face indicating finality—and that was when Natalie ducked away, fearful that his superior vision would detect her surveillance.

By the time she'd gathered her courage to look again, they were gone; only the remains of Spyder's meal and LaCroix's untouched cappuccino marked the fact that they'd ever been there. Nat scanned the food court, to no avail.

She still vividly remembered the night Nick had dragged himself into her office, looking dazed and troubled. "She's LaCroix's," had been the first words out of his mouth, "she belongs to LaCroix," and Nat had spent the next hour dragging the story out of him in bits and pieces; she'd rarely seen him so distracted. "She has no idea what she's doing," had been his constant refrain. "How can she allow it? How can she welcome it?"

Natalie had not told him of her own conflicting feelings on that fateful Valentine's Day: the aura of power LaCroix had emitted, and how seductive it had been; her involuntary attraction to that intensity, like a moth to flame. She'd tried to chalk it up to scientific fascination, but it had been more... oh, yes, she could see how Spyder might succumb to that allure. Even though it would be an unthinkable option for Nat; even during the meteor scare, when she'd panicked, she'd sought out a stranger rather

than risk contacting him...

Nor had Natalie pointed out the parallel between Spyder's situation and her own. After all, the only real difference was that the teenager was far closer to LaCroix than she was to Nick... a closeness she sometimes envied.

She'd seen the girl at the trial, hair slicked back and up into a neat bun, wearing a respectable skirt and blazer that had to have been LaCroix's idea. Spyder had carried herself with remarkable aplomb, all calm imperturbability... but the thing that had made the greatest impression upon Nat had been the large, wine-red mark on the side of the girl's neck, a massive hickey that not even her scarf could adequately hide.

Nat had wondered, briefly, what it would be like to bear a similar mark herself, courtesy of Nick's lips and fangs—and the depth and intensity of her sudden jealousy had astonished her.

Nick had asked her, several times, to keep tabs on Spyder. He'd made his own inquiries, of course, which were always deflected politely but firmly; Spyder wasn't having any of his 'good cop' routine. He'd had the notion that perhaps Nat, being female, might be able to get closer to the girl, find out what was really happening... but she'd never followed up on his request, unwilling to acknowledge her turbulent feelings about the young woman's lifestyle. Now, though... maybe it was time to make that phone call, and see if Spyder would talk to her.

And Natalie didn't admit to herself that she'd been looking for just such a rationalization ever since she'd learned the truth about Spyder: that she had a good many questions that screamed for answers, should she ever find the courage to ask them...

"She agreed to meet you for lunch? That's great!"

"Yeah," Nat said doubtfully.

Nick studied her closely—too closely for her comfort. "Nat, what's wrong?"

Just my luck, she thought, with fond annoyance. *Half the time he's so wrapped up in his own little world of private turmoil that he's blithely unaware of my feelings—and when he does notice, it's always when I don't want him to know!*

"I just don't know what I'm going to say to her," Nat deflected his inquiry neatly. "I mean, she's so much younger than me, we're from different worlds."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Nick said, in that light tone that he used to conceal deeper emotion. "I think you two have plenty in common," and his eyes darkened and flickered away.

That was when Nat realized she'd underestimated Nick's

sensitivity—she'd assumed that he'd never drawn the parallel between Spyder and herself, and she'd been wrong. He'd noticed the similarity of their situations, and obviously it bothered him.

"You're not LaCroix," she told him, her intuition delving straight to the heart of the matter. "We have a completely different arrangement, you and I..."

"Sure," said Nick in a flat voice, edged faintly with sarcasm. "He has more fun..." He caught himself, and grimaced at his own words. "I didn't mean it that way..."

"Nick," Nat chided him gently; just his name, nothing more. By now, he knew everything she was likely to say, at any rate. Why, just a few days ago, they'd had a long discussion about the way he wrapped himself in angst like a mummy in bandages...

His eyes met hers, and he smiled a little. "I know, I know." Then, in a completely different tone, "I'm worried about Spyder. She's so young, she has no idea what she's getting into..."

Do any of us really know? Nat mused. *I thought I knew the risks when I signed on, but I never imagined just how difficult and how confusing it would all be...*

"If anyone can make her see reason," Nick concluded, "it's you."

"Oh, really?" she countered archly.

"Well, you talk sense into me, don't you?" He smiled, that sweetly mischievous smile against which Natalie had no defense.

"Sometimes," Nat responded, "when you let me," and couldn't help grinning back at him.

He leaned forward and kissed her, one of those brief affectionate pecks that were all he would allow himself, and in the timeless moment when his lips pressed against her forehead, she found herself remembering the massive crimson bruise on Spyder's neck, and wondering what that must've felt like...

The first thing she noticed, upon meeting Spyder at the underground exit to the subway, was that the hickey had grown dramatically; it seemed to cover half the girl's neck.

Nat tore her gaze away, before the other could notice. "Hi, Spyder," she said casually.

She nodded curtly, spiky black hair fluttering. "We going to the food court downstairs?" she said abruptly. "'Cause I told some people they could find me there."

"All right," Nat agreed, not allowing herself to show her annoyance at the girl's manner.

Spyder led the way, moving at a brisk walk; Nat was hard-pressed to keep up. "I really don't have time for this," she muttered. "I got more important things to worry about than keeping a lunch date..."

"Then why are you here?" Nat retorted, her patience fraying in response to the teenager's air of sullen resentment.

The answer threw her completely off balance. "'Cause the Boss thought it'd be good for me," the girl snarled, stalking off at a brisk rate.

Natalie hurried after her, perplexed. Now why would LaCroix...?

Unless he was scheming again, up to his old tricks; in which case it was vital for her to gather every scrap of information she could procure.

Spyder chose a coffeeshop just off the main food court nearest to the subway; and Nat watched as she sipped at the cappuccino she'd ordered—caught the sudden burst of emotion in her eyes, the brief burst of misery that suffused her porcelain complexion. "How is he?" she advanced tentatively.

"He's fine!" the young woman snarled, startlingly vehement. "He's just fine!"

"Okay, okay, I was just asking!" Nat said hastily.

The girl closed her eyes and drew a deep, ragged breath. "He's just fine," she repeated stubbornly, with a veiled anger that Natalie couldn't comprehend. Again, she lifted the cup of cappuccino to her lips, inhaled deeply the same way LaCroix had... and tears formed along the lines of her eyelids, dampening her mascara-ed lashes for only a moment before she blinked them away.

But Nat had no chance to pursue the matter, for at that moment they were approached by a skinny, scruffy young man—she instinctively clutched her purse a little tighter, but Spyder beckoned him closer. Strawberry-blond disheveled hair in tangles around his shoulders, torn and stained t-shirt, ragged jeans... and a familiar-looking bruise on his neck.

"You look terrible," said Nat's companion disapprovingly.

The young man—only a boy, really—shrugged, though behind his unconcern lay a faint trace of worry. "Ran out of hot water," he muttered.

"So you take a cold shower; you must be familiar with the concept, eh? But you don't go out on the street looking like a bum. That's how you get us all in trouble." Spyder's eyes narrowed. "Go home," she directed, "clean yourself up, and don't let me see you looking like this again!"

"Ah, c'mon..." the boy started to protest.

"You'd rather the Boss was the one to tell you? Go home, I said. Make yourself presentable."

"Spyder, I need money..."

The girl's obsidian eyes grew icy cold. "So what happened to your allowance, huh? What'd you spend it on? Beer? Crack? No, don't tell me; you can tell the Boss, later. He'll know, in any case."

"I didn't do nothin'!" he protested. "I gave it to Lizzie..."

"Who's Lizzie?" Spyder shot back. "Your dealer?"

"My sister," said the boy sullenly.

She eyed him consideringly. "You oughta bring her around..."

"Nah, she tests negative. He wouldn't want her," he demurred.

"So why does she need your money?" Spyder wanted to know.

"'Cause she spends all hers on dope," said the other, in a voice much too world-weary for someone his age, "and she can't pay her rent, an' if she gets evicted again, they'll take away her kid..."

"Would be a good thing, maybe," said Spyder, "but who am I to say? You want to throw good money after bad, that's your business, long as you don't go spending it on drugs. But you do not go around looking like that, you understand me?"

"Yeah, I understand you," he muttered, thrust out his hand, palm up. "I need carfare."

She dug into her purse and came up with two tokens. "That's it?" he complained.

"'S all you need to get home," she said serenely. "Make yourself look human, and come an' see me later," and he scowled and trudged off.

When the young man was gone, Spyder returned her attention to Natalie, staring at her challengingly, daring her to comment. And Nat couldn't help but rise to the challenge; throughout the conversation, indignation had been steadily growing inside her.

"What are you doing, managing his harem?" she spoke up sharply.

"None of your damn business," said Spyder curtly.

"How old was that kid?" Nat demanded. "Fourteen, fifteen?"

"Old enough to be half-dead," the girl spat back. "Like I was, when the Boss found me."

"But there's no reason for any of you to have to live this way!" Anguish rose inside Natalie, dispelling her anger. "There are other alternatives..."

"Oh yeah?" Spyder leaned back in her chair, regarding the other woman steadily. For the first time, Nat noticed that the girl's eyes were not merely dark, but pure obsidian black. Their color was a complete contrast from a certain pale blue stare, yet there was a striking similarity to LaCroix in her cool gaze.

"You mean," she said, "alternatives like the homeless shelter you used to volunteer at. Yeah, I remember you from there," in response to Nat's wide-eyed startlement. "I went there a couple of times. For help."

Spyder took another sip of her cappuccino before continuing. "All the system ever gave me was grief," she said quietly. "You were all right; you did your best, and you treated us like people. But, Nat, tell me... did it ever occur to you to do more? I mean... if you'd been there in that alley, and seen me lying on the ground in a puddle with a needle hangin' out of my

neck—would you have offered to take me home with you?"

Natalie remembered her days at the shelter. Recalled some of the people who she'd met there: often filthy and reeking to high heaven, other times simply unsavory. Racked her brain, and finally found an image she thought might've been Spyder: a thin, sullen, shifty-eyed girl in grubby rags. Would she have invited that person to her private sanctum?

She had to admit, if only to herself, that she would not.

Spyder apparently read her concession in her eyes. "LaCroix took me in," she said. "It doesn't matter why."

"It does matter!" Nat protested.

"Not to me. Nat," said the girl, suddenly earnest, "he gives me everything I want, everything I need..."

"For a price," the coroner reminded her somberly.

"A price I'm willing to pay! The blood banks won't take me anymore, but he can't get enough..." Abruptly, Spyder was blinking back tears. "You don't know what it's like," she whispered urgently. "How good it feels when they drink. How incredible it is to be that close... if you did, if you'd ever done it, you wouldn't be saying these things to me. You'd know how I feel. You'd understand."

There was a tight knot constricting Nat's throat; she couldn't speak.

"You'd realize that I will never leave LaCroix," Spyder said, very deliberately. "Not for any reason."

"Do you love him?" Nat said involuntarily.

"That's none of your damn business." The girl's response was without rancor. "You don't wanna go telling me about you an' Nick, I'm sure."

"There is no 'me and Nick', actually," she responded, feigning unconcern.

"Oh, yeah?" Spyder was silent a moment. "I'm sorry," and there was genuine pity in her voice.

"No, it's..." and again, Nat's voice caught in her throat.

"It's the blood thing, right? 'Cause he doesn't do humans, I know that..." Spyder sighed. "You don't know what you're missing."

It took Nat a few moments to muster up her nerve to ask. "What am I missing?" she said finally, almost afraid to hear the answer.

The coal-black eyes seemed to soften with reminiscence. "Complete intimacy," Spyder murmured. "There's a connection..." and her voice trailed off into silence.

In the beginning, Nat had been terrified of the vampire within Nick, though she'd never let him see it... at some point along the months and years of their friendship, the fangs and glowing eyes had ceased to be frightening. She could still remember, with vivid clarity, the first night she'd awoken from a dream of vampiric passion, and ached for more—it had disturbed her, that she could come to think of something so violent and

horrifying as being desirable.

It still disturbed her; yet the prospect of becoming intimate with Nick-the-vampire was more desirable than it had ever been.

And now, here was Spyder, proof positive that a human might know a vampire's kiss and survive, alive and intact, to experience it again... Spyder, so pale and thin that she might have been one of the living dead herself, bearing that massive bruise on her neck as silent testimony of her inhuman affair. "Does that hurt?" Nat wondered, staring at the purplish-blue blemish

"It never hurts," said the girl dreamily, evidently still caught up in her reverie. "Never."

"'Never' is a long time," Natalie said heavily. "Especially for them."

All at once, the cool porcelain smoothness of the other's face began to ripple, dissolving into anguish. "Not long enough," said Spyder in a tight voice, choking on unshed tears.

"Hey..." Nat said, surprised and distressed, and reached out compassionately; but Spyder reined in her unhappiness and pulled herself together, evading Nat's touch.

"S'alright," she said quickly, "everything's fine," but something was wrong, something was very wrong; Natalie could see it, behind the facade of nonchalance the girl wore like armor.

And Spyder must have known that her mask was slipping, for she gathered purse and jacket hurriedly. "I gotta go," she muttered.

"Spyder!" Natalie wasn't expecting her to heed the summons; the young woman was moving like a speeding bullet, desperate to be absolutely anywhere except here, facing Nat's inquiring eyes. But against all odds, Spyder paused for the briefest moment, glanced back at her—and the fathomless black eyes were wide and scared, as Nat had never seen them before.

In that moment, she wasn't an ex-junkie, ex-hooker, vampire's slave... in that instant, Spyder was a frightened teenage girl, hardly more than a child, who was in 'way over her head and sinking deeper by the moment; and Nat's heart cried for her pain.

"If you need anything," she said, "call me."

"Nat..." Spyder began tiredly, ready to brush off the words.

"Anything," said Natalie. "Any time. If you need me... call."

The girl hesitated, staring into Nat's eyes with that unreadable black gaze of hers—then finally nodded. "Okay," she said dubiously, "but it won't do any good. There's nothing you can do. Nothing at all."

A moment later, she was gone, vanished into the crowd, disappearing with all the speed and efficiency of the vampire she was not.

Nat remained there for another moment, thinking. Spyder was happy with LaCroix: there was no mistaking that misty-eyed glow. Definitely the

look of a satisfied woman... but nevertheless, something was distressing her. And if it wasn't LaCroix, what could it be? Try as she might, Nat couldn't make sense of it all.

She determined that first thing after sunset, as soon as he awoke for the night, she would tell Nick all about it.

Nick awoke from a restless slumber, feeling nearly as worn and drained as when he'd gone to sleep. It had been several days since his last drink of cow's blood; he'd been surviving on Nat's protein drinks and sparing helpings of mortal food that left his digestive tract feeling as if it had been rubbed down with sandpaper. Yes, he felt like hell—but he also felt more alive, more human than he had in months, and that was well worth the price.

With Janette gone, with Schanke... gone... his pursuit of humanity was more important to him than ever; it was all he had left that mattered. Well, almost all. But then, that was even more hopeless than his eternal quest to be mortal, or at least, so it seemed at times.

He'd stayed up late, 'way past his 'bedtime', just so that he could test the effects of the latest regimen... and the results had left him feeling buoyed. He'd watched the sunrise—okay, so he'd only glimpsed faint traces of dawning light through the slats of his shutters; it was more than he'd been able to do before.

He couldn't wait to see the look on Nat's face when he told her about it.

So Nick was happy—dizzy, fatigued, lightheaded and vaguely nauseous, but happy—as he stumbled toward the bathroom, to try to make himself presentable in order to face another night.

A steaming shower worked wonders... the temperature of the water would have scalded human flesh; Nick perceived it as gentle warmth. It eased into his battered immortal body and rejuvenated him, with an efficiency that was second only to the healing effects of fresh human blood—which was not an option he was willing to consider.

Afterwards, scrubbed and shaved and (nearly) glowing, he wrapped himself in his favorite old, comfy robe and strolled toward the kitchen, almost looking forward to his morning carrot-and-celery drink...

...and then, the most indescribably horrible smell surrounded him.

He gagged, falling to his knees helplessly. Garlic, and burning rose petals, and scorched human flesh, and a miasma of other odors combining into an oppressive stench, powerful enough to be a weapon... he tried not to breathe, knowing that vampires didn't need oxygen, knowing also that the reflex for respiration was so deeply ingrained that it took thousands of

years to overcome... knowing that he didn't have a chance, that he couldn't withstand the assault.

As he slowly succumbed to unconsciousness, he felt small, slender hands on his wrists, gripping him firmly...

Nick's second awakening was far less innocuous than the first had been.

At first, it didn't seem so bad: soft mattress beneath him, air free of horrid smells... then he tried to rise, and found that he couldn't; he was restrained, with shackles too strong for him to break.

He opened his eyes, and found himself in a concrete-walled room, possibly a basement; no furnishings except for an avocado-green refrigerator and his own bed. Tested the restraints again, to no avail. *LaCroix,* Nick thought, *has to be,* and searched his mind for anything he might have done to provoke such treatment, came up blank. Of course, there were so many old conflicts, so very many that even he'd forgotten many of them over the centuries...

Nick sighed, tried to relax. Whatever this was about, he would find out soon enough. In the meantime... he was hungry, very hungry. And Nat's veggie drink was the farthest thing from his mind.

The scent of human blood wafted through the air, and the vampire within him was immediately attuned to its source; he twisted around, drawn by that luscious aroma despite himself.

And was unsurprised to find that it was Spyder, making her way into his concrete prison from the trapdoor entrance above.

She came to stand beside the bed, her pale skin luminescent in the faint glow of the single naked lightbulb overhead. Her very presence, inches away, incited the vampire within him to a near-frenzy; it was all he could do to restrain the beast. *This is ridiculous,* Nick thought, dismayed, *I'm not <u>that</u> hungry,* but the desire would not be rationalized away; it raged within him, demanding satiation.

Spyder watched him struggle with himself. "I smell good," she said dispassionately. "I'm HIV-positive, and that makes me smell good. An' I've got my period—but then, you know that."

He could hardly have missed the fact; it was as evident to his vampire senses as, say, a neon sign would have been to human vision.

"I'm sorry about that," she went on to say. "I don't much like the idea of being a tease. You can't have me—but you can have this," and she displayed the bottle in her hand; he didn't have to smell it to know that it was mortal stock.

Nick closed his eyes and summoned all his will against the ravenous

ache growing inside him. "I don't drink human blood," he said, from between gritted teeth.

"I know," said Spyder, "but you're gonna do it now," and before he could react, her fingers were pinching his nose shut.

He knew, with perfect rational clarity, that vampires did not need oxygen in order to survive—but the human reflex was incredibly strong, even after nearly eight centuries; he opened his mouth to gasp for breath, and Spyder tipped the contents of the bottle down his throat.

Nick tried, he really tried to spit it out—and then the taste of it sank into his tongue and surged through him like an electric jolt, and there was no resisting. Human blood: nothing else was as intensely satisfying to the beast that governed his soul.

After he'd drained the bottle, Spyder wiped the spilled blood from his face and his neck. "Sorry about this," she said matter-of-factly, "but *il faut absolument*, or however that goes."

"Why is it necessary?" Nick probed. "What does LaCroix want from me, why is he doing this to me?"

Her eyes met his, black and unreadable. "Life's a bitch, sometimes," she said. "Things happen that we don't expect. Be careful about making those sweeping assumptions, Nicholas. If you think you know what's going on, you're probably wrong," and with that, she left him alone.

In the silence that followed her departure, Nick felt the inevitable depression sinking in. Weeks of hard work, of rigorous deprivation; he'd actually been making progress—and now that was blown straight to hell, thanks to Spyder's little stunt. Oh, sure, he was feeling better physically than he had before, but that didn't assuage his guilt, or his regret...

Feeling better—much better. Much stronger.

He tested the shackles again, to no avail. Obviously, his captor had prepared thoroughly. LaCroix had always been damnably thorough...

With a groan, he sank back into his pillows; it was, after all, the only thing he could do at the moment.

It disturbed Natalie that Nick had not answered his phone all evening, nor gone in to work, especially so soon after the last time he'd nearly skipped town; she was having a coffee-and-muffin late-night lunch on Yonge Street, debating whether she should take the rest of the night off and go over to his place to see what was happening, when the couple on the other side of the street caught her eye.

At first, she almost didn't make the connection, but the female half of the pair was so obviously Spyder that she knew who the other had to be. What stymied her was the walking stick, and the limp—she had never seen

a vampire move that way, as if even the smallest effort hurt.

To see LaCroix, of all people, in such shape—it boggled the mind.

In all other respects, they seemed a perfectly normal couple; any casual onlooker who might imagine them to be father and daughter would abandon that assumption within moments, for the subtle aura of intimacy that surrounded them was too strong. Even from across the street, she could see the way they looked at each other; no one could mistake that for paternal affection...

The arm he kept curled around her shoulders, though: that wasn't affection, that was for support.

If she hadn't known better, she would have estimated that it was arthritis, or some other degenerative disease, but that was impossible... vampires didn't have those troubles, did they? They were supposed to be immortal, invulnerable...

...but even from across the street, it was perfectly obvious that LaCroix was in pain.

Spyder paused, turned to him, stretched her arms up and pulled him down, and LaCroix drew her close, buried his face against her neck... Fascinated, Natalie watched what would have appeared to anyone else to be a normal kiss; her enhanced knowledge and sharp perception allowed her to discern the exact moment when his fangs penetrated Spyder's flesh. When he began to take her blood—right there in the middle of Yonge Street; and no one else even noticed.

What really got to Natalie was the way Spyder's hand settled against the nape of his neck, accepting his violation of her body, and urging him even closer.

When he drew back, only moments later, his condition seemed much improved; as they continued their progress down the street, he moved much more easily, without apparent difficulty. Spyder, on the other hand, seemed unsteady on her feet: now LaCroix's arm around her shoulders served as her support, rather than the other way around.

She said something to him, a slight grin quirking her lips, and he laughed; one hand glided along her spiked hair, smoothing it down in a light caress. Nat caught a clear glance at his face in that moment, reflecting the glow of a storefront sign, and was surprised to see tenderness there. From what Nick had said about him, from what she herself had observed, she hadn't thought him capable of it...

It made her wonder if perhaps Spyder didn't know what she was talking about, after all; if maybe, just maybe, there was more to her relationship with LaCroix than either she or Nick had imagined.

Nick: the thought of him reminded Nat of his absence, and her worry. No time now to ponder the intricacies of LaCroix's rapport with his 'dinner partner'; she had her own vampire to worry about.

She drained the last of her coffee, and hurried back toward her office to see if there were any messages waiting for her.

When Spyder returned to Nick's cell, hours later, the bruise on her neck had grown larger, deeper; there was a new set of puncture wounds right in the center of that mark, fresh and raw. She moved unsteadily, as if her feet refused to track, and nearly stumbled and fell on her way to the refrigerator.

"I see LaCroix has been keeping you busy," Nick said icily, torn between pity for the unwitting victim and fury at her willing complicity with his captivity.

"He's hungry," said Spyder, in a slow, weary voice. "He's been so hungry lately..." She rubbed at the side of her neck absently as she selected a pair of bottles from the fridge: a standard wine bottle, and a plastic liter flask of Pepsi.

"He always did have quite an appetite," Nick muttered.

"There's a difference between appetite and hunger!" She reined in her temper with an obvious effort. "Now. Are you going to drink willingly this time, or am I going to have to force it down your throat again?"

"I will not willingly drink human blood," he said obstinately.

"Fine, go ahead, be difficult." Again, she clamped his nostrils shut; this time he was prepared, but even so, he couldn't hold out against the stubborn human reflex that commanded him to gulp for air... and again, once that first taste had impacted upon him, there was no denying his need.

"Why is he doing this to me?" he asked her later; it came out as a sort of a plaintive groan.

Spyder looked at him oddly. "I don't see him anywhere in the room," she said, "do you?"

"Oh, come on, I know he's behind this," Nick said impatiently.

He held still as she wiped away a rivulet of spilled blood that had trickled along his cheekbone to linger beside his earlobe; it had itched terribly, and he was glad of her attention to detail. "Why do you hate him so?" the girl asked him idly.

"Aside from the fact that he's made my life a living hell for centuries?" he replied, in the same nonchalant tone she'd used.

"He does have his ways," she acknowledged. "But, y'know, he's only ever been good to me, so I really don't understand your point of view." And was silent for a moment. "Hasn't he ever been nice to you?" she asked. "I mean, even a little bit?"

Nick thought back, reluctantly, to times that had not been quite so horrible—times in his youth, when the hunt and the kill had been something he'd savored; in those years, he and LaCroix had been not only allies, but friends—times when some action or inaction of his had caused terrible repercussions, when LaCroix had come along just in time to haul him out of the flames... "It hasn't been all bad," he admitted.

"I should hope not. He's not that bad a guy," said Spyder.

Such a blithely unknowing statement; it made him laugh. "Oh, Spyder," Nick sighed, "trust me, he is that bad a guy."

"No, he's not," said the girl. "Why should I trust you? I don't know you." She smoothed the hair away from his face, the stray strands that had been tickling his face. "Him, I know. Him, I trust."

The very idea of trusting LaCroix was almost more than Nick could take; he laughed weakly. "You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into..."

"You're the one who doesn't have a clue," Spyder shot back. "You don't know LaCroix half as well as I do."

This was so patently absurd a statement that Nick could only stare at her in blank astonishment.

Her chin lifted stubbornly, black eyes flashing flame. "Did you know that he's a huge fan of the Die Hard movies?" Spyder said. "That he took a morning flight to L.A. to catch the premiere of the first sequel? Did you know that he buys cups of take-out cappuccino, just 'cause he likes the smell? Or that he can't walk down Yonge Street without giving money to every single teenage panhandler he encounters, 'cause he says they all remind him of me?" She took a swig from her bottle of Pepsi, gulping it down quickly. "Did you know that he's positively addicted to the old Bugs Bunny cartoons? Or that he owns a boa constrictor named Jake? Or that he keeps a stack of Olivia Newton-John records hidden in the very back of his closet?"

"Olivia Newton-John?" Nick said, dumbfounded.

"You don't know anything about him!" she accused. "You're too busy hating him to bother getting to know the person he is now. You think he's just this horrible evil creature—and he's so much more than that; you have no idea. I've spent more quality time with him in the last six months than you have in your entire life—but you're so quick to judge him, aren't you? Maybe, before you start spouting off, you oughta make sure you know what you're talking about."

He gauged the intensity of her face, of her words, and thought he understood. "You're in love with him," he said.

She rolled her eyes, made an exasperated sound. "What is it with you people, that everything has to be love?" Spyder shook her head. "I know him," she said. "I understand him. I don't need to love him."

But you do, Nick thought, when she was gone. *You love him, or you think you do; and it's clouding your judgment, can't you see?* It angered him, that LaCroix had manipulated this child so thoroughly to his own ends.

Poor deluded Spyder; she didn't have a chance.

At some point, Nick slept, and when he awoke, it was to the faint sound of voices overhead. Spyder's, and LaCroix's; the latter resounded with irritation. "What is this about?" it muttered, as the trap door in the ceiling began to open.

"You'll see," Spyder's voice responded, as the light patter of her footsteps marked her entry.

LaCroix followed more slowly; and as he emerged from the shadows that cloaked the rickety stairway, Nick could only stare. Several shades paler than usual, much too thin—and he moved like an old man, like the ancient being he was. Nick had never seen him this way... nor had he ever witnessed such a look of absolute astonishment on LaCroix's face.

He stared at Nick, shackled to the bed, with utter disbelief. "What is this?" he demanded.

"It's the answer to our problems," replied Spyder serenely.

LaCroix turned, surveyed the girl with something very like shock—and Nick realized suddenly that LaCroix had had nothing to do with his capture and imprisonment; had in fact had no idea what was going on.

"You?" he said involuntarily, to the teenager. "This was all your doing?"

She glanced at him and smiled, a very LaCroix-ian smile.

The other vampire shook his head as if to clear it, uncharacteristically bewildered. "How?"

"It was easy," said Spyder proudly. "I mixed up some garlic juice, and some, whaddaya call it, anesthetic, an' some other stuff, to make a really noxious smell—then I found Nick's alarm code in your encrypted database, the one you didn't know I had the password to? an' I broke into his apartment, and snuck up on him when he wasn't looking." She paused for breath, seemingly oblivious to the incredulous expressions on her auditors' faces. "Then, once he was unconscious, I shoved him into a suitcase—you know, that really big one I charged on your AMEX card? -- an' I wheeled him downstairs, and into the back of a rented van, and then I brought him here." She eyed Nick sheepishly. "It's a good thing you guys don't bruise," she said. "The suitcase kind of fell down the stairs."

"Thanks a lot," Nick muttered, under his breath.

Spyder shrugged, returned her attention to LaCroix. "So," she wanted

to know, "did I do okay, Boss?"

He shook his head again, gazing at the girl as if he'd never seen her before, marveling. *"C'est formidable,"* LaCroix murmured. "And to think I chose you solely for the taste of your blood. Araignette," and his arm moved, haltingly and with difficulty, until his hand rested on her shoulder, "you should not have done this."

"Why not?" she argued. "Someone has to do something! An' you're not doing anything; it's almost like you want this to happen..."

"Araignette," and now there was steel in the soft voice, cold and forbidding, "enough."

"No!" Spyder cried, anguished. "It's not enough, damn it! I'm not just gonna stand by and let you die!"

Her words impacted like a stone flung into a still pond, spreading ripples of stunned silence in their wake.

"I won't lose you," she said, into that stillness, her voice quiet but intense. "I can't."

LaCroix touched her cheek, a brief caress of fingertips, and the look on his face was a sight to behold. "Leave us," he said, his voice remarkably gentle.

Spyder dug into the pocket of her jeans, came up with a key, presumably the one corresponding to the shackles binding Nick's wrists; she took LaCroix's hand in both of hers, folded it around the object—brought his hand up to her lips and kissed it—then departed obediently, without a backward glance.

Alone with LaCroix, Nick held his breath and waited to see what might happen next.

The other man looked at the key he held, turned it over in his hand. "Araignette," he said softly, and it might have been a curse—or a prayer. "I hope you won't take it amiss if I tell you that she is by far the most promising of my children."

"She's certainly loyal," Nick spoke up hesitantly.

"She is... remarkable. What dark god saw fit to send me such a gift, I wonder?" Slowly, carefully, LaCroix made his way to Nick's bedside. "You're slipping, Nicholas," he scolded. "Honestly, she's mortal—and you let her capture you so easily? I taught you better than that."

Nick found himself watching, not LaCroix's face, but the difficulty with which he moved, and the small signs of the pain he was trying to avoid acknowledging. "LaCroix," he said, "what's going on?"

"It's nothing you need concern yourself with." The elder vampire began working on the first of the locks, the one securing Nick's right ankle.

"I'll be the judge of that," Nick demurred. "And considering the fact that I'm tied to a bed in somebody's basement, I think I have the right to know!"

All at once, the pale eyes were steely-dark. "You will not exact retribution against Spyder for this," LaCroix directed. "There are... extenuating circumstances."

"Tell me what they are, and I'll decide if I agree," Nick snapped at him. Stared pointedly at the gnarled fingers that labored to work the key in the lock. "You're not exactly in any shape to protect her from my wrath, are you?"

As the words left his mouth, it occurred to him that they were unnecessarily cruel; and he wondered how it was that LaCroix was so good at evoking that venom from him. Well, of course, LaCroix was a master of cruelty, and he had learned well from the example—but right now, returning that lesson in kind was akin to kicking a hurt animal.

He looked at LaCroix, more closely now than before, and realized with shock that Spyder's words were correct—had to be. Although he had only ever seen vampires die from the usual culprits, sunlight and fire and by the stake, though he had never had the faintest inkling that any other form of destruction was possible... Nick looked at LaCroix and knew that he was looking at a dying man.

"Tell me," he repeated, and there was no anger in his voice, only urgency.

The other vampire managed, finally, to get the lock open and free his ankle; and Nick wiggled his foot in relief, enjoying the simple pleasure of renewed movement after the prolonged immobility. With the same pained slowness, he moved to the other side of the bed, to the shackle that restrained Nick's left leg.

And as he worked, LaCroix began to speak, relating the tale in a calm, unemotional voice.

It wasn't unheard of for a vampire to return from ashes, if that vampire were old enough and powerful enough to rise from that fiery death—but it was uncommon, to say the least; and it was by no means as simple a process as the healing of a bullet hole.

The first three days of LaCroix's convalescence had taken place in the dumpster outside Nick's building, where his remains had been left, along with the rest of the garbage.

On the fourth night, a creature had emerged from that dubious haven—a creature so burned and scarred as to be unrecognizable; a creature that could barely creep along the asphalt ground to the sanctuary of the closest manhole, and the sewer system.

Rats were plentiful, but not nearly enough to sustain his ravaged form. As soon as he was able, he began preying on sewer workers, homeless

people, any mortal that crossed his subterranean path. And still it wasn't enough; four weeks, it took, before he could stagger on two feet rather than crawl. Six weeks before his vision cleared enough for him to see more than shadows. Eight weeks until he could speak, rather than growling unintelligibly.

As soon as he had healed enough to sign his name legibly, to appear vaguely human instead of monstrous, LaCroix left the dank sewers behind, in favor of a plush luxury condominium.

He was still too weak to hunt; all he could do was prey on the helpless. But there were enough of those, and it wasn't long, relatively speaking, before he'd recovered sufficiently to exact his revenge upon Nicholas, the one who'd caused him so many months of agony. It seemed, at that point, as if life had returned to normal.

Very shortly afterwards, however, LaCroix had realized that things weren't quite that simple.

His recurrent annoying symptoms had led him to consult with others of their kind, vampires even older and more powerful than he was, and more knowledgeable about the various odd difficulties that might besiege them. It was from one of these ancient immortals that he'd learned of the nature of his problem.

Regeneration from near-total oblivion was a much more intricate process than simple vampiric healing; when it occurred at all, it was very likely to go wrong. One tiny error in replication, magnified hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of times—even the smallest flaw could be disastrous. Sometimes parts of the body failed to grow, leaving the subject malformed; sometimes growth was uncontrolled, resulting in hideous monstrosities. And sometimes, parts of the rebuilt body didn't function properly...

Subsequent tests proved that in LaCroix's case, what passed for an immune system in his vampire physiology had gone berserk. Instead of attacking foreign invaders, his antibodies were attacking the rest of his body, crippling him from the inside out. And apparently, this situation was chronic, irreversible—and sure to be fatal.

He had found, though, that there were ways to ameliorate the symptoms. For some reason, the AIDS virus seemed to slow the progression of the syndrome, disabling the offending antibodies and making him feel almost healthy again. Accordingly, he had sought out HIV-positive victims, Spyder and her contemporaries, and their blood had sustained him—but as time went on, he needed more and more of it, until finally no amount of tainted blood could take away the advancing pain.

But according to the elder vampire who LaCroix had consulted, there was one possible solution.

The blood passed from vampire master to child at the time of crossing

over was potent, and affected the new immortal permanently; elements of the parent's blood chemistry remained in the fledgling's system forever. If LaCroix were to receive significant infusions of the blood of one of his children, there was a chance that his body might 'recognize' those portions of itself that had gone wrong, and heal itself accordingly. A chance, only a chance—but the only one LaCroix had.

That is, if he had an offspring who would be willing to donate large portions of blood so that his sire might live.

Which he did not have.

He had made the mistake of telling Spyder the full truth, not believing her capable of taking direct action—a point on which he had underestimated her dreadfully—not realizing how distraught she would be over the prospect of his demise. He'd already seen to it that she would be well provided for; after all, who else did he have to leave his riches to? The one-time street urchin would be fabulously wealthy, and he'd made arrangements for an old trusted ally of his to bring Spyder over should she decide she wanted it, for he didn't dare do it himself... surely, that would be enough to allay her fears, he'd reasoned. She would have money, and immortal power; what else might she want?

To his surprise, he'd learned that neither mattered to his young protégé; that the only thing she wanted was him. After centuries of being reviled by his children, this had been an immeasurably startling discovery—surprising, and touching.

The later revelation, that she would go so far as to kidnap his vampire son for his benefit, had affected him even more.

And it was no more than the simple truth that his initial interest in Spyder had been solely in her blood. He had never expected the hapless urchin to worm her way into his cold heart, warming it from the inside—so that now, when logically his concern should be for his own faltering life, all he could think of was Spyder's distress, her pain, and how hard it would be for her when he was gone. She would mourn him—and how remarkable that was, that someone should actually mourn Lucien LaCroix's death.

How astonishing it was to him, that someone might love him. Enough to put her own life in peril, in return for a slim chance at saving his.

It almost made it all worthwhile.

For a long while after LaCroix had finished speaking, there was silence.

The lock fastening Nick's left wrist finally submitted to the vampire's efforts, and Nick took the key from LaCroix and freed his right wrist himself; he sat up cross-legged on the bed and rubbed at his wrists absently, studying the other man.

LaCroix lowered himself onto the edge of the bed wearily, not even bothering to try to hide the pain that creased his face. Where was the monster Nick remembered, the terrible oppressor who'd damaged him so vitally, so frequently, over the years? He couldn't find a trace of that being in the person sitting beside him now. Perhaps it was only his suffering, muting the venom beneath; perhaps it was something more.

Perhaps Spyder was right—maybe it was time for him to try to look beyond the traumas of the past, to see what existed in the present; what might exist in the future.

It seemed that LaCroix's future rested in his hands...

"Why can't you accept me for what I am?" he asked his 'father'. No censure in his voice, only honest curiosity.

The elder vampire made a face. "I have been trying," he reproved. "But I will never understand you, Nicholas. I simply can't comprehend the things that are important to you, or why they should be." There was no malice in his answer, either.

"Spyder is important to you," Nick said quietly.

LaCroix was silent so long that he thought he wouldn't answer. "She is," he acknowledged finally.

"I guess I can't really blame her for what she did," he said, "under the circumstances." Nick laughed unwillingly. "She really is something."

"Understatement of the century." LaCroix shifted position, absently rubbed at his knee. "Go home, Nicholas. Your coroner friend is probably worried sick about you."

"Now that's the understatement of the century." Nick eyed him warily. "You're really going to let me leave?"

A long sigh. "Nicholas, go home," LaCroix said.

He stood up cautiously, reacquainting himself with the business of being vertical—and glanced back at LaCroix. "Don't you want my help?"

"I would sooner die than beg you for assistance," was the instantaneous reply.

Nick thought it over for a moment. Only a moment; that was all it took. "You don't have to beg," he said, and sat back down on the edge of the bed. "You don't even have to ask."

LaCroix shot him a suspicious sideways look. "Now why would you want to save my life? You tried to kill me, remember?"

"I don't know why. I don't want to think about it. Do me a favor; don't ask me questions I don't want to answer, okay?" Nick murmured wryly.

The response was a sardonic laugh. "Denial: yes, I'm familiar with the concept. I suppose I can no longer maintain that dear little Spyder is only a convenient food source." LaCroix shook his head. "Nicholas, your blood is so weak, it could hardly make a difference. Your diet of cow's blood..."

"Spyder force-fed me human stock," Nick told him, understanding for

the first time why she had.

"Ahhh... my girl is thorough," and the note of pride in LaCroix's voice was unmistakable. "Still—this is not a minor endeavor, you must realize. I would require... significant amounts of blood. In your present state of malnourishment, I might easily kill you."

"So I'll call Nat," Nick said steadily. "She'll help."

"Will she?" LaCroix wondered.

"She will," was the confident reply, though in fact Nick had no idea how Nat might react to that request.

"Nick! Where have you been...?!"

"I need your help, Nat," Nick said, cutting her off before she could say more. "I need a doctor specializing in the undead—and blood, human blood. A lot of it."

Not even the barest moment's hesitation. "I'll be right there," Nat said. "Where are you?"

Nick gave her the address of the house in whose basement he'd been imprisoned; and afterwards, he sat there, motionless, holding the dead receiver in his hands. No questions, no arguments, no protests. Perfect faith, absolute trust. *I'll be right there.* As she had always been.

"An astonishing thing," said LaCroix mildly, "to be so loved."

Startled, Nick's eyes met his. "You do understand."

"Perhaps. A little. Sometimes." LaCroix considered. "More often now than before, I think."

Beside him on the couch, Spyder nestled a little closer, and his arm tightened around her shoulders in response. "This may not work, Araignette," he told her soberly.

"It will work. It has to," said the girl fiercely. "I told you, I'm not letting you die!"

"I heard you; you needn't yell," LaCroix said, affectionately; it was a tone Nick had never before heard in his voice.

He gazed at the teenager curiously. "Why didn't you just ask me?"

"Couldn't take the chance you might say 'no'," Spyder replied, without batting an eyelash. "Some things are too important to bother asking permission first."

"Oh, I can see why you two get along so well," Nick said, without thinking, and Spyder smothered her giggles with the back of her hand. "But how did you know I wouldn't kill you for it afterwards?"

"Well, 'cause you're an ethical vampire," she retorted, "you wouldn't hurt me. Besides... I figured, if it worked, he'd protect me—and if it didn't work, I wouldn't care about living anyhow."

"Idiot," said LaCroix sharply. "Suicide is never an option."

"You could've fooled me," she muttered. "You should've done something yourself; I shouldn't have had to get involved in the first place!"

"I wouldn't have had it otherwise. It's about time you made yourself useful." And though the statement was uncomplimentary and his tone harsh, every word was an endearment, a declaration of emotion: and Spyder was lapping it up like a kitten with a bowl of cream.

"I try," she told him, beaming. "In my own ineffectual way."

"Ineffectual," he repeated, and laughed, tousling her unruly hair with a sweep of his hand. "You're too damned effective for anyone's good...!"

Nick sipped at his glass of blood, savoring the taste with only a small pang of conscience intruding—after all, there was a good reason, this time; he had to feed, to strengthen himself with human stock, if his blood were to be of any use in combating LaCroix's malady. With his guilt temporarily appeased, he could admit that the lush flavor of the blood, the feel of it zinging through his system and empowering him, was something he'd sorely missed.

Looking at Spyder and LaCroix, seeing them together that way, made him think of Natalie, who was even now rushing to his aid... made him think of the human pleasures that they could not know, and the vampiric ones which he had ruthlessly denied himself. There had been times when the temptation had been nearly unendurable... and the longing he felt for Nat was continuous: how he wished that they could embrace as easily, as casually as the couple before him...

...but there was one small problem: that closeness could only exist within the bond of blood. And Nick had decided, very early in their relationship, that he would never allow himself to take that irrevocable step—Natalie deserved whatever small spark of humanity he still possessed, not the curse of a vampire's love.

The fact that Spyder evidently didn't consider it to be a curse was of no consequence. That was her choice, to live in the world of endless night; Nick had forsworn that choice long ago.

And yet... looking at Spyder and LaCroix made him realize anew that he might never gain the ability to live in Nat's world of sunlight. LaCroix would most likely bring Spyder across, she would live forever—but Natalie's brief life would be extinguished in a relative instant, and he might never know what it was like to truly love her...

Nick shook his head, took a long swallow of his drink, and tried to banish the thought from his head. It would do him no good to wallow in misery—and Nat was on her way over; the last thing she needed was to have to deal with his depression in addition to everything else.

By the time she arrived, he'd managed to talk himself out of it; the bottle of human blood he'd finished had helped him drown his

uncertainties. As he met her at the door, though, he realized that he was now facing a whole new set of difficulties.

"Hi, Nat," he said, somewhat sheepishly.

She looked at him, and he saw her register the pallor of his skin, the plethora of little signs that indicated his departure from the health-food-and-cow's-blood regimen, that made it abundantly obvious that he had not been following his advice. Involuntarily, he tensed, awaiting her verdict.

Instead, Nat smiled at him, a philosophical, hey-life-sucks-sometimes sort of smile that eased his anxiety and his guilty conscience. "Hi, Nick," she said. "What's the problem?"

"It's a long story," he said wryly, and ushered her inside.

"Give me the short form," she ordered.

"Um... LaCroix's dying, and only my blood can save him. Is that short enough?"

"Okay," said Natalie, without blinking an eye. "And you need the human blood because...?"

Nick sighed. "Because if I'm going to donate the volume of blood he needs, I have to feed..."

She thought about that. "Okay," she said, her voice indicating tentative acceptance. "What else?"

"Spyder kidnapped me," he confessed.

"She kidnapped you?" Nat stared at him. "As in, tied your hands behind your back and forced you into a car...?"

"As in, knocked him out cold and stuffed him into a suitcase," Spyder chimed in, from the couch.

Taken aback, she looked from the girl back to Nick. "You're slipping," she chided him.

"That's what I said," LaCroix concurred.

Nat glanced at him—took a second, longer look—and instantly, the doctor in her emerged, took precedence above all else. "How long have you been feeling ill?" she said to him. "And what exactly is the problem?"

LaCroix told her, using terminology considerably more detailed than that which he'd used to explain the situation to Nick; Natalie listened, and nodded her understanding. "It sounds to me as if a transfusion would be more effective in this case than assimilation through the digestive system, since the point is to preserve the donor blood intact."

"That was our thinking as well," he agreed.

"Which will be a real joy, since you guys have veins the diameter of sewing thread. Well, we'd best get started, hadn't we? Good thing I came prepared." She began rolling up her sleeves. "Where's the kitchen? I need to wash up."

"I'll show you," said Spyder, and detached herself from LaCroix's side; as the two women headed off, Nick heard Nat say, "You stuffed him in a

suitcase?"

"Another remarkable woman, your Natalie," was LaCroix's opinion, and Nick had to agree.

"You know," his 'father' went on, "I think you may come to regret your moral stance, where that one is concerned. Perhaps in, say, fifty or sixty years."

"I think you may well be right," Nick admitted. He'd often pondered what he would do, on the day when Natalie died; wondered how he would endure the pain. "But I have no other choice."

"Nicholas, there is always a choice."

"Not for me. Although I may sometimes wish it were otherwise." Nick sighed. "I can't be what you want me to be, LaCroix."

"So I see. More's the pity; you suffer needlessly for your so-called sins."

"Not as much as I'd suffer if I were to conform to your idea of a proper lifestyle..."

"Nicholas," LaCroix interrupted, "I really do have a dreadful headache; must we have this conversation?"

Surprised, Nick laughed. "Why bother?" he agreed. "Especially since we both know it by heart."

LaCroix smiled a little at that.

Spyder came back, draped herself across him. "You mad at me?" she wanted to know.

"Interfere in my affairs again and I'll kill you," LaCroix said mildly.

"Yes, Boss," she said demurely, grinning.

His fingertips trailed a slow path, from her cheekbone to her neck: and Nick realized in an instant what was going to happen, and knew he couldn't bear to see it. The entire situation hit too close to home... he made his escape quickly, ducking into the kitchen as if he might find sanctuary there.

And in a way, he did; for there was Nat, washing up, and just the sight of her calmed him somehow. She was human, and therefore smelled like food, a fact which was his greatest shame—but she was his friend, and that was priceless to him.

She glanced up at him and smiled. "You okay?" she wanted to know.

He shrugged; there really wasn't an answer to that question. "Nat... am I doing the right thing?"

Natalie dried her hands and turned to face him, giving him her full attention. "Do you believe you're doing the right thing?" she countered.

Nick thought about it. "Yes," he admitted finally. "But do you think I am?"

"What I think doesn't matter," Nat said promptly, "you have to follow your own heart." She reached out and slid her hand along his arm in a comforting gesture. "And yes, I think you're doing the right thing."

Her touch was torturous, evoking desires Nick loathed acknowledging—yet he wouldn't have traded it for anything. "He's LaCroix," he muttered. "I know I'll regret this someday, probably soon, but I've lost so many people... I have to help him."

"You do," she agreed serenely. "You can't just let him die."

"My foolishness," he said darkly.

"Your compassion," Nat disagreed. "Your humanity."

Nick reached back to her, took her in his arms—loosely; the beast within him had awakened at the taste of human blood, and now raged at him for more. "You really think so?" he asked her, in a voice that pleaded for reassurance.

"I really think so," Natalie said. "I believe in you, Nick."

That statement, delivered so calmly, struck at the deepest part of his soul. "Thank you," he whispered, and could not say more; the lump in his throat made speech impossible.

After everything they'd been through, after all the mistakes he'd made during their years together, the fact that Nat still had faith in him was no less than a miracle.

Let LaCroix have his plaything; to Nick, Nat's human friendship was worth any amount of suffering. And someday, he would stand in the sun beside her—he knew it with absolute certainty. Nat believed in him, and with that power on his side, how could he fail?

"All right," she said, and detached herself from him gently, "we'd better get started. Come on, you; let's get this over with, shall we?"

He smiled, and followed her out.

Epilogue

"Hey," said a voice, and Natalie looked up from her piles of neglected paperwork to see the spiky-haired teenager standing in front of her desk.

During the week of endless transfusion, she had grown so gaunt and pale that Nat had feared for her life; throughout the process, as LaCroix's body had struggled to heal itself, his hunger had been ferocious. Bottled supplies had assuaged most of that need, but it had been impossible to pry Spyder from his side, and it had been just as impossible for LaCroix to endure her proximity without taking what he most desired from her. Now that the nightmare had passed, though, Spyder had apparently had time to rest and regain her strength: she looked much healthier, though her pallor was still several shades whiter than normal, and her black eyes had acquired an odd sparkle that didn't seem quite human.

The bruised spot on the side of her neck was smaller, but still very much there; and fastened around that neck was a diamond pendant that had to have cost several years of Nat's salary.

"I'm going to do some traveling," Spyder announced, without preamble. "Europe and stuff. LaCroix wants me to—he says I should see the world by sunlight, while I still can." She scuffled her foot against the floor. "I thought maybe you'd want to go with me."

"Ah, if only I could." Natalie shook her head. "Kiddo, I don't have that sort of money."

"I could pick up your expenses, if I had to; I have my own accounts and credit cards, now," she said proudly. "But I think the Boss'd probably pick up the tab for your trip. He likes you," the girl mentioned, apparently as an afterthought.

"Is that supposed to be a good thing?" Nat said dubiously, and Spyder laughed.

"C'mon, come with me," she cajoled. "It'll be fun..."

"Well, we'll see." The prospect of going to Europe, especially for free, was appealing—but Nat had the sinking sense that she was getting in over her head. Spyder's life could never be hers; it wouldn't do her any good to get all wrapped up in it. She and Nick didn't have that luxury...

"By the way," Spyder said, apparently casually, "the Boss was wondering, the other night, just exactly what you'd done with the blood samples you took from him before the transfusions."

Nat had been waiting for this particular inquiry, and took a moment to consider what her response might be. "Tell him that I'm studying them," she said. "Investigating the possibility that there might be something there

to help me find a cure for Nick's condition."

"He's not going to like that," the girl pointed out.

"No, he's not," Natalie agreed. "But he owes me—more importantly, he owes Nick. And he knows it."

"This is true," Spyder conceded. "But he's still not gonna like it."

"But he's going to learn to deal with it," Nat said firmly. "I have had enough vampire infighting! If LaCroix wants to interfere with my life, or with Nick's life while I'm around, he is going to do it quietly and politely and without bloodshed. Tell him I said so." She had spent nearly a week of her life monitoring the transfusions that had given the elder vampire back his life; in her eyes, he had migrated from the category of 'supernatural menace' to that of 'patient'. There was no way LaCroix was ever going to be able to intimidate her again.

"I'll tell him," said the girl, unperturbed.

"And, by the way," Natalie continued, "the next time you pull a stunt like that with Nick, you'd better run for cover, 'cause you'll have to deal with me. He might think you had a perfectly good reason for nearly giving him garlic poisoning and packing him into a suitcase as if he were yesterday's dirty laundry... but I don't care what he or LaCroix or anyone else says: you're mortal, which makes this my jurisdiction, and I am severely tempted to slam you into next week for what you've done."

Surprisingly, Spyder laughed; her coal-black eyes were merry. "You really think I could get away with that twice? I had the element of surprise on my side last time—no way I'll get that chance again." She sobered, met Nat's eyes squarely. "Y'know, I wasn't real thrilled about doing it," she said, "my hands were shaking like a leaf the whole time, I was so scared; why d'you think I dropped the suitcase down the stairs? I thought sure that he'd come to before I could get him tied down, an' I was sure he'd kill me for it, no matter how many morals he's got... But I knew I had to do it, Nat; it was the only way I could make this thing happen. You would've done the same thing, if it was Nick's life at stake."

Would I? Nat wondered. Considering she'd placed her career and her life in jeopardy more than once for Nick's sake, she had to agree... but the mental image of herself planning a sneak attack on, say, LaCroix was incomprehensible.

She had to hand it to her: Spyder had guts, that was for sure. For taking on a vampire single-handedly, and conquering him utterly... in more ways than one. From what Nat had seen, Spyder was more LaCroix's mistress, now, than his victim—and that particular seduction had to have been significantly more difficult than rendering Nick unconscious and stuffing him into a suitcase.

"Come traveling with me," cajoled the girl, in an entirely different voice. "That way, I'll have someone to hang out with during the day..."

She didn't even want to consider what that might imply. "I'll think about it," she said.

A messenger came in, with a delivery form for Nat to sign, and a box—Spyder glanced at it, said, "I gotta go; I'll call," and disappeared swiftly. Nat thought that was odd, and eyed the carton closely before signing for it. It seemed perfectly ordinary; a plain brown box, return address... CERK-AM? Hmmm.

She signed for the package, for hers weren't exactly the sort of fears she could voice to the delivery girl; and afterwards she stared at it for a few moments, wondering what to do.

Natalie knew the telltale signs of mailbombs, and this package bore none of them; besides, that wasn't LaCroix's style. *I should call Nick,* she thought, but discarded the idea: she had been relying on him for entirely too long, in her opinion, and the idea that she needed him present to deal with every little detail of her existence was galling.

If Spyder can handle LaCroix, she determined, *then so can I.*

She took an old scalpel and carefully slit open the tape that sealed the box, removed the styrofoam packing pellets one by one until the top of another box was revealed; she opened that, too, ever so cautiously. The first thing she saw was an envelope, and she lifted it out. Classic stationery, plain white, exactly what she would have expected, and in neat script: Doctor Lambert—Merci beaucoup—L.

More curious now than ever, she reached inside the box and withdrew its contents, and the breath left her lungs in a quick rush when she saw what she was holding.

Diamonds spilling over her trembling fingers, diamonds and emeralds, thousands of dollars worth... she knew enough to recognize the real thing when she saw it; and the very idea that she now owned the jewels which rested in her hands was incomprehensible...

Maybe I'll call Nick after all, she thought distantly, but made no move to pick up the phone; couldn't tear her eyes away from LaCroix's gift.

Spyder was down by the lakefront, watching the last dying traces of sunlight fade from the sky through a chain-link fence, when she felt a sudden rush of motion and then a presence behind her.

She could imagine how frightening such a thing might be, to his victims: she had been hoping, waiting for his arrival, and wasn't even startled. "Nat got the box," she said.

"Ah, good." Cool fingertips stroked her neck, gliding along the bruised spot that never hurt, provoking a tingle of answering

desire.

"That was some bunch of rocks," she said wistfully, remembering the extravagant necklace he'd selected for the coroner.

"A trinket, a mere bauble," he said dismissively. "I believe in paying for a job well done. And besides... it will make Nicholas look quite stingy, by comparison. After all, what has he ever given her, other than aggravation?"

She smothered her giggles. "You really are a nasty piece of work, aren't you?" she said fondly.

"I really am," he agreed placidly.

"An' speaking of payment for a job well done... what do I get?" Spyder probed.

His eyebrows raised; he feigned surprise. "You?"

"I worked my butt off to save your life," she retorted. "Natalie gets diamonds; what do I get?"

Strong arms turned her around to face him, pulled her close. "That depends," LaCroix said, in the velvety purr Spyder just couldn't resist. "What do you want?"

She gazed up at him with eyes filled with love, and didn't reply. He knew what she wanted. He'd already given it to her. And in a little while, he'd give her the last bit, the part that would bring them together forever...

LaCroix was what she wanted: all she'd ever wanted.

The look in his eyes told her that he knew it, too.

After a moment, he spoke again. "You asked her about the trip?"

"Yeah," Spyder confirmed, "she said she'd think it over."

"I doubt she'll accept; she's hardly likely to abandon her work and her life—and Nicholas—so easily. More's the pity; you need a keeper," LaCroix pronounced darkly.

She glared at him. "I do not!"

"Your kidnapping and incarceration of Nicholas..." he tried to look severe, and failed utterly, laughed instead, "was the most entertainment I've had in centuries; but if you ever dare do something so foolhardy again..."

"Desperate times, desperate measures," Spyder returned. "I'll do what I think is best, the same way you do. The same way you taught me to, Boss."

The arms around her tightened—not affectionately. "And if I forbid you to take action," said with steel in the voice, "will you defy me?"

"If it's to save your life, I will!" she said defiantly. "Even if you kill me for it."

His grip eased fractionally. "And if it is not?"

"Well, whaddaya think, Boss?" She struggled, broke free of his restraint—not that she ever could've managed it unless he'd permitted her to. "I belong to you," she told him. "I belonged to you from the start; we both know that. An' I've never minded it—and you know that, too." Spyder drew a deep breath. "I'm always going to be loyal to you," she said, "I'm never going to betray you. But you gotta let me use my own judgment some of the time, y'know? You can't be telling me what to do all the time..."

"Your judgment," he said smoothly, "is often fatally flawed."

"And yours is that much better?" She sighed. "C'mon, you gotta trust me, at least a little..."

"I do trust you," said LaCroix, in an odd tone. "More than a little."

Spyder knew him well enough to recognize that the statement was more revealing, coming from him, than a declaration of love would have been; and the realization brought tears to her eyes. "You're making me smudge my mascara," she complained, and slapped at him lightly.

He didn't even pretend that her weak blow had so much as grazed him; instead, he brought up one fingertip and flicked away the offending teardrop. "You must obey me," he said gravely.

"I do obey you," she responded, just as soberly. "When you're not being an idiot, I obey you."

Her statement provoked an unwilling laugh. "I suppose I'll have to take what I can get," he mused.

"You wouldn't like blind obedience," she countered, "you'd be bored to death within days."

"I'll never find out for certain, though, will I? Not with you around." His arms closed around her again, and this time she melted into the embrace. He was strong and healthy again, immortal and invulnerable, and it was so good to be held by that immense strength. She'd been so afraid...

"Araignette," he whispered in her ear, and she felt his lips against her neck—the other side, now; they were trying to let the bruised spot heal, though old habits died hard—and her hands slid along his shoulders, to the back of his head, and pulled him down.

Let Natalie have her human world, and her human-style

vampire; let her have her world by sunlight. Spyder was perfectly content with the shadows—was downright delighted to be a creature of the night, if only by association. To her, twilight was the best part of the day, and LaCroix's demonic kisses the sweetest intimacy she'd ever known.

An intimacy that would last forever...

She surrendered, yielded utterly: to his dark desires, to the compelling lure of the endless night.

END?